On the Metapolitics of Decay: Walter Benjamin’s Will to Happiness

by

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the early work of Walter Benjamin (ca. 1916 – 1926). The period under consideration falls between Benjamin’s break from the German Youth Movement (which also coincides with the beginning of the Great War) and his turn to Marxism. Benjamin’s life and work during this period is characterized by, on the one hand, an intensified interest in theological concepts and, on the other hand, the apparent refusal of concrete political engagement. It is the claim of the dissertation that what Benjamin elaborates – in the absence of a concrete political program and with the aid of theological concepts – is a metaphysical conception of politics: what I call a metapolitics of decay.

This metapolitics is informed by a certain theological understanding of transience: the decay that attends to a creation which has “fallen” from its original condition. While Benjamin’s metapolitics is oriented towards redemption – to the lossless consummation of historical life – it pursues this goal, not by circumventing transience, but by concentrating on the decay of nature – and by extension, of history.
On The Metapolitics of Decay

The metapolitical limit upon concrete politics, however, does not foreclose the possibility of the latter. In 1919, in a text posthumously named the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” Benjamin does in fact spell out what I call a politics of transience. One of the major historical and conceptual trajectories that the dissertation traces, therefore, is the movement from the metapolitics of decay to the politics of transience.

The political significance of transience and decay reveals itself in the profane and melancholic fixation upon the decay of nature and of history. And yet it is only with the concept of happiness that both the metapolitical and the political dimensions of Benjamin’s work become most clear. Happiness (Glück), which is manifestly not the bliss (Seligkeit) of the prelapsarian condition, is no escape from the melancholy situation of historical life. It remains definitively profane and capable of taking an “elegiac” form. But it is precisely by way of its profanity and its melancholy that happiness comes to signify the idea of redemption. The will to happiness, for Benjamin, is a (weak) messianic force.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

I. On the Metapolitics of Decay

[T]he war broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. It destroyed not only the beauty of the countrysides through which it passed and the works of art which it met with on its path but it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our admiration for many philosophers and artists and our hopes of a final triumph over the differences between nations and races. It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits within us which we thought had been tamed forever by centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds. It made our country small again and made the rest of the world far remote. It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless.


These ruminations on the effects of the Great War, the catastrophe of a generation, were penned by Sigmund Freud in 1915. This sentiment is not unlike that of many intellectuals of the time – including Walter Benjamin. Here, in a piece entitled, “On Transience,” Freud recalls a walk through the countryside, a landscape which had yet to be destroyed by war, with two unnamed companions: a “taciturn friend” (Lou Andreas-Salomé, a former lover of Nietzsche) and a “now famous” poet (Rainer Maria Rilke). He describes their various responses to nature’s manifest “proneness to decay.” While Rilke lamented the inevitable death of all that was beautiful, Andreas-Salomé protested against it. Freud, on the other hand, saw not only the futility of such responses, but the calculable benefits of decay: “Transience value is scarcity value in time.”

Neither the despondency of the first companion, nor the silent protest of the second, was a proper

response, according to Freud, to the brute, natural fact of decline. “Mourning” was perfectly acceptable, but mourning is a work that must finally be completed. What characterized his friends’ responses was not mourning, but “a revolt … against mourning.” While he does not name it in this context, what is referred to elsewhere as the “pathological” condition of “melancholia” plagues the verbose and the furtive friend alike.

Freud identifies the walk as having taken place a year before the outbreak of the war, and thus the transience in question was a tendency of nature itself. This was not yet the brutal force of modern war. Yet Freud derives a lesson from these responses to natural decay for the coming to terms with destruction. Just as the period of mourning over the finitude of nature should properly result in the greater appreciation of that very mortality, so too should a proper “working through” of the violence of war provide compensation. “We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before.”

Had Walter Benjamin been along for this walk, he too would have been reprimanded by Freud. There is a melancholia and reticence which is characteristic of Benjamin: both in terms of his work and his person. Benjamin, confronted with the same decaying nature and the same destructive war, will turn out to pursue, in a fascinating series of texts written between 1916 and 1926, the very same responses which Freud finds so inappropriate. Both silent protest and ceaseless lament (in ancient and modern tragedy, respectively\(^2\)) will be seen as fitting responses according to Benjamin. Both of these responses will, in some oblique way, signify a certain kind of messianism, or at least exercise a certain messianic force. This period of Benjamin’s work, typically considered to be his “theological” phase, is characterized by a persistent interest in the theme of the messianic. Messianism and melancholia coexist, then, in Benjamin’s early work. In

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\(^2\) Modern “tragedy,” however, should be placed in scare quotes. The possibility of modern tragedy is one that Benjamin will dispute. See chapter 3 below.
the chapters that follow I will seek to elaborate more precisely how this coordination works.

In order to properly understand how Benjamin does coordinate these themes, however, it will be important to highlight how he does not. In Benjamin’s early writings, paradigmatically in the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” a theory of the messianic is elaborated in tandem with a theory of transience or downfall (Untergang). But, messianism should not be seen here to redeem melancholia. That is, it is not a matter of a Messiah coming to rescue the world from despair, as though the sufferings of earthly existence were somehow the “brithpangs of the Messiah.” For Benjamin, downfall does not precede the messianic, but “corresponds” with it. From the perspective of the profane, in any case, the messianic force of historical action is to be discerned not in the overcoming or the redemption of natural transience, but in these very cycles of decay. That is, downfall is to be activated, as it were, in the form of “nihilism.”

This “world politics whose method is nihilism,” is what I will call Benjamin’s politics of transience. This politics of transience, while still bearing the signature of abstraction and esotericism which Benjamin was prone to during the period in which it was composed, is conditioned by an even more abstruse, more metaphysical and less practical theory of politics. This theory, what I will call a metapolitics of decay, is elaborated in a series of texts Benjamin composed before and after his more explicit turn to “politics” in 1919. It emerges in various texts from about 1916 through to his turn to historical materialism in the late 1920s. What characterizes this metapolitics is a focus upon decay in its metaphysical, cultural and finally political registers.

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3 Even if such a perspective might inform what Gershom Scholem has called Benjamin’s “profound messianic faith,” it is not operative in the theory of politics which it is the task of this project to elaborate. See Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin: the story of a friendship trans. Lee Siegel (New York Review Books, 2003).

From the Metapolitics of Decay...

Richard Wolin, in what is still the most insightful and thorough monographs on Benjamin’s thought available in English, provides a helpfully concise description of the logic of the metapolitics of decay. I want to question some aspects of Wolin’s interpretation, but his distillation of this logic is helpful.

Despite its pronounced esotericism, Benjamin’s early literary criticism is consistent, at times single-minded, in the pursuit of its program. At issue is the “fallen” character of human history, which takes on the appearance of “natural history,” a history that is consigned to an inexorable fate of decay and decline. The subjective corollary of this fate is inescapable network of guilt which originates with man’s expulsion from Paradise and which serves as a ceaseless testimony to the seemingly infinite distance that separates historical man from the state of grace represented by the messianic era. Benjamin takes this stand initially in profane life. And from his lowly station in the fallen historical world, he sifts through the ruins of bygone ages for traces of redeemed life in the hope that if these traces can be renewed from the present, the link between the Messianic era, the key to which is mysteriously inscribed in man’s past, and the present era, however godforsaken it may appear, can be, if not guaranteed, at least prevented from fading into oblivion. The paradox, the magic, the labor of Sisyphus of Benjamin’s early aesthetics consisted in his effort to conjure images of “Messianic time” in the midst of an iniquitous historical era that could only seem emphatically removed from all hope of salvation.

In many ways the task of the following chapters consists in extrapolating upon the various dimensions of this logic of decay and its consequences. The present project, however, will offer a slight adjustment to Wolin’s important contribution. While Wolin describes this phase of Benjamin’s work as his “early literary criticism,” and while this is certainly true in terms of the types of interventions Benjamin engages in, I want to read these literary critical works as implicit political reflections. The (meta-)political dimension of Benjamin’s readings of biblical, Attic, and Baroque texts, (see chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively) is not foregrounded by Benjamin, but it is still visible. This visibility is enhanced insofar as I take the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” an

elliptical textual fragment from the early 1920s, as a starting point and an interpretive key.\(^6\)

I take this text to be an intensive rehearsal of Benjamin’s early literary and metaphysical reflections in a moment of political crisis. The “Fragment” represents a transfer of Benjamin’s aesthetic and critical energies from the various texts of the tradition to the question, if not the task, of historical action. The details surrounding this moment of reorientation are spelled out in the final chapter, but the outbreak of the First World War in August, 1914 and Benjamin’s subsequent encounter with Ernst Bloch in Switzerland in 1919 are the event and the figure who prepared the ground for Benjamin’s political reflections. The “Fragment,” furthermore, places the earlier writings in a more political light. And while these various works cannot be irresponsibly pulled out of their respective historical and intellectual contexts, they can be seen as the essential background for the marginally more concrete intervention of the “Fragment.”

Benjamin’s claim, that Wolin distills here as history’s consignment “to an inexorable fate of decay and decline,” is, first of all, a metaphysical claim. While it manifests itself in cultural and political form, Benjamin’s criticisms of bourgeois decadence are more deeply rooted than Nietzsche’s or Oswald Spengler’s.\(^7\) The downfall of history, which resembles the decaying of the natural world, is not itself a historical phenomenon. Its origins are pre-historical: they are metaphysically inscribed in humanity’s alienated relation to nature and to language; an alienation which precedes any historical encounter. Benjamin finds the description of this pre-historical fall in the book of Genesis. But, just as little as this is a historical claim, is it a properly religious one. While the realm of speculation exceeds that of historical life, the effects of this fall which Benjamin is interested in exploring, are decidedly profane. It is this confluence of the metaphysical and the profane which the concept of the metapolitics of decay is attempting to

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signify.

Wolin’s argument about Benjamin’s relation to politics is that it was conditioned by a “will to transcendence.” Benjamin, along with his contemporaries Georg Lukacs and Ernst Bloch, argues Wolin, “attempted to combine a critique of the prosaic, dispirited world of capitalist rationality with a search for a qualitatively new Archimedean point from which the world could be not just changed, but apocalyptically transformed.” This will to transcendence proceeded, Wolin continues, by way of “an obstinate, principled refusal to brook any compromise with the status quo.” It was this will, finally, which distinguished Benjamin and his allies from the similar but incompatible theories of Max Weber, Georg Simmel and others who deemed “present conditions a priori insurmountable and thus remained trapped at the level of a ‘tragic’ view of life.” For Wolin, the will to transcendence, the will to “redemption,” in Benjamin’s case, was the will that carried his thought beyond a philosophy of history and his politics beyond materialism. I do not dispute either the claim that Benjamin harbored this will to transcendence – what Scholem called his “messianic faith” – or the consequences Wolin draws from it. However, I do think that this perspective is largely implicit in Benjamin’s work – that the revelation of this “theological” perspective is a helpful key for deciphering the complexities of Benjamin’s corpus, but that this is not the more explicit aim of Benjamin’s early politics. As a point of method, then, I would like to propose taking up not the “will to transcendence” which is implied in Benjamin, but the explicitly profane “will to happiness.” This approach will not ignore the theological dimension of Benjamin’s work, but nor will it allow it to distract from the claims Benjamin makes. There is much more to say about this will to happiness, but first I want

8 Wolin, Benjamin, 16.
9 Wolin, Benjamin, 16.
10 Wolin, Benjamin, 16.
11 Wolin, Benjamin, 16.
to say something about the politics of transience for which it serves as the basis.

... to the Politics of Transience

In the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” written sometime between 1919 and 1921, the profane is characterized by Benjamin as that “order” whose negative limits are set by theology. The profane, by virtue of its profanity, lacks any positive access to the theological sphere which conditions it. However, when the profane is ordered by the force of happiness, it regains an access to redemption – it comes to “correspond” to the latter, in Benjamin’s terms. However, this correspondence must be seen in dialectical terms. In this case dialectical means: by way of its opposite. Happiness comes to correspond to redemption by owning up to its anti-messianic tendency. These rather abstract considerations on the relationship between theology, happiness and the profane will need to be spelled out in more detail. The chapters that follow will do just this.

If Gershom Scholem, who was one of Benjamin’s closest friends at the time, is correct, then the period between his exit from the Youth Movement – and, simultaneously from the tutelage of Gustav Wyneken, the leader of the radically intellectualist Free School Movement12 – and his turn to Marxism which began in the late 1920s, was a period in which Benjamin consistently refused to engage in politics. Despite the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, an event of epochal significance for Germany and the West, and the subsequent chaos of the German Revolution of 1918-1919, Benjamin, it seems, absorbed himself in the study of “the metaphysics of language.”

Through the influence of Ernst Bloch and Hugo Ball, “Benjamin was confronted with the

12 See Chapter 1 below.
question of political activity, and he declined to engage in such activity the way they urged him to.”

Scholem describes the attitude to politics that he and Benjamin shared as one of “theocratic anarchism.” What this appears to mean is that for Benjamin and Scholem, what was taking place under the name of politics was a betrayal of the metaphysical insights that they were ruminating upon – individually and together. A true politics would only be conceivable insofar as it could bring these metaphysical – or metapolitical – insights to bear upon historical action.

Whatever else might be meant by “theocratic anarchism,” and Scholem does not fill out the significance of the label, it points to a metaphysical reflection on politics. It is not my intention to dispute Scholem’s portrayal of Benjamin’s thinking about politics during this period. What I would like to do is draw the connection between his “concept of the political,” if I can force this analogy, as it was being elaborated in various contexts and his politics. What I want to argue is that from 1916 on Benjamin’s writings on language, tragic drama and happiness are simultaneously sketches of a metapolitics. But before saying more about the metapolitical dimension, a word on the politics mentioned above will be necessary. In anticipation of the fuller treatment of this politics in the final chapter, I want to identify a series of theses according to which this politics, what I will call a politics of transience, functions.

**First Thesis:** Theology is the presupposition, but never the basis for historical action.

For Benjamin, a true politics will be one which recognizes, on the one hand, the unique perspective which theology offers upon the material world. This theology will not be one derived from any positive religious tradition. Although this theology will retain a distinctly Jewish character, it will look, among other times and places, to the “paganism” of ancient Greece and the Christianity of modern Europe. But just as a true politics will not spurn the essential insights

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13 Scholem, *Friendship*, 98.
14 Scholem, *Friendship*, 103.
of theology, nor will it presume an unmediated relationship between theology and politics. The politics of transience will neither forsake theology in an overly presumptuous secularism, nor will it attempt to harness immediately theological insights under profane conditions.

Second Thesis: Happiness – and not theology – is the legitimate basis for a profane politics.

Happiness meets the requirements of the first thesis in a unique way. It adopts, according to Benjamin, a perspective upon profane life which lacks the opposed but equally misguided illusions of theological immediacy and pure secularity.

Third Thesis: Happiness is – dialectically – related to redemption.

Happiness walks this line between theocracy and secularism by way of a certain messianism. This messianism will affirm the coming of the Messiah (as Benjamin himself does), if only in order to define the possible limits of profane action. It will maintain the limiting condition of redemption, not as an ideal or a goal (Ziel) toward which it might ascend, but as the positive pole of a trajectory it will reverse. Happiness, that is, will not seek to ascend to the heights of the divine kingdom, but will seek downfall (Untergang). And, in a strange – Benjamin will say, “mystical” – way, this downward tendency will correspond to the messianic. It will correspond by way of the “eternity” which is inscribed in the downward movement of the profane: this movement is called transience. In this natural “rhythm” of eternal downfall, which transience displays and happiness encourages, a “messianic” rhythm is discernable. But what is meant by happiness?

II. The “Will to Happiness”

In a short story, dating from 1896, the narrator of Thomas Mann's “The Will to Happiness”
[Der Wille zum Glück] relates an episode of the deepest melancholy: the story of a man's tortured pursuit of his beloved, the achievement of which coincides precisely with his own death.\(^\text{15}\) The tragic conclusion of this early story sits in an uneasy, but not unthinkable relationship with the “happiness” of its title; for it is less the attainment of a blessed state that is Mann's concern, than the *will* which pursues it. Indeed, it is this *will to happiness* which is the very form of Paolo Hofmann's life; the very possibility of his survival.

Paolo was an artist, an accomplished, but sickly painter – the narrator refers constantly to his “yellowish” complexion and to the visibility of the blue veins in his face. His heart had been stolen by the young Ada, daughter of a wealthy Baron von Stein of Munich. The unnamed narrator, an old school friend of Paolo's, comments throughout the story, more so than anything else, upon Paolo's figure, his gestures and postures, in what amounts to a narrative in the mode of physiognomy. So, for instance, when Paolo brings his companion to the Stein household to meet the Baroness for the first time, we read of Paolo's animal-like demeanour.

> [A]s we waited for the door to open, I noticed a peculiar change in him. Except for a nervous twitch of his eyelids, everything about him was totally still. His head was tilted slightly forward. The skin of his forehead was slightly taut. He almost gave the impression of an animal desperately pricking up its ears, listening with all its muscles tensed. (80)

This posture, this “violent, frantically strained calm of a predator ready to pounce,” (90) is a characteristic description of Paolo when he enters into proximity with his beloved Ada. It stands in marked contrast to the periodic sinking “into... limp fatigue,” (91) which characterized Paolo in the years following the refusal, on the part of Ada's father, to allow his daughter's hand in marriage – on account of Paolo's illness. Paolo's will to happiness, so it seemed, had faded, as

had his already precarious health. Were it not for the occasional return of this will, sustained by the memory of Ada's promise to him that she would marry no one else, death would have overtaken him.

“I think the last few years I have seen death a thousand times face to face. I did not die. Something holds me back. I jump up, I think of something, I hang on to a sentence that I repeat twenty times while my eyes hungrily drink in all the light and life around me...Do you understand what I am saying?” (92)

As the story draws to a close, as Ada does indeed refuse an alternative suitor, Baron von Stein finally concedes to his daughter's wishes. In a letter to Paolo he declares, not so much his blessing, as his resignation to the situation. “I hereby declare that we, her parents, no longer wish to stand in the way of our child's happiness.” (94) As Paolo sets off on his return to Ada, his friend wishes him “all the happiness in the world.” (96) But the wish for his happiness was, ironically, was also edging him towards death. For “[h]e died the morning after the wedding night – almost during the wedding night.” (96) But, the narrator tells us, “[t]his is the way it had to be.”

Was it not simply will, the will to happiness, that had enabled him to keep death at bay for such a long time? He had to die, die without a fight, without resistance, once his will to happiness was satisfied. He no longer had a pretext to live. (97)

While this conclusion might be tragic, it is certainly not sad. Indeed, death is seen here as the apotheosis of fulfilled happiness. As far as Paolo is concerned, this is exactly as it should be – the matter of Ada’s perspective is, perhaps, another question. There is a sense, then, that the profane fulfillment of romantic love stands in for a properly theological culmination; for a kind of redemption. But here eschatology is spun in terms of mortal, earthly pleasure of sexual love. “When passages occur in Thomas Mann that reveal religious perplexity,” claims one of his biographers, “death is always involved.”

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Happiness will come to play an important role in the work of Walter Benjamin. Much like the will which sustained Mann’s protagonist, happiness will serve Benjamin as a form of life which stands in for eschatology. This is not to say that it functions as a simple secularization of an originally theological concept – as one of a possible many replacements for redemption. Instead, it will be the trajectory or the force (Kraft) that sustains that form of life which is denied a determinable route to redemption. It will be the force of “profane” life. There is more to be said about this relation between happiness, the profane and redemption. The following chapters will do just this. However, it will be important to note even at this point, that there is a basically political dimension to this complex. This politics, insofar as it is directed to the concerns of historical action will be called a politics of transience. But, even in cases where such a connection to concrete existence is no apparent, an implicit metapolitics of decay is still discernable. The nature of and the difference between these two types of politics will be adumbrated momentarily. But first some context will be necessary.

Indissolubility of Happiness and Redemption

In other words, the idea [Vorstellung] of happiness is indissolubly bound up [Or: resonates inalienably (schwingt... unveräußerlich)] with the idea of redemption.

This notion of an indissoluble bond between happiness and redemption is a late formulation in the context of Benjamin’s writings. It comes from the second thesis of the 1940 text “On the Concept of History.” The nature of this bond, furthermore, is not identical with the relation that this project seeks to analyze. However, the proximity of happiness to theological themes is everywhere apparent in Benjamin’s corpus. It will be important to refer to some of

Press, 2002), 91.

these instances, even if they will not be treated in detail in the following chapters. We can begin with a paradigmatic case of this bond in some of Benjamin’s reflections upon the “new angel.”

A 1920 painting by Paul Klee, “Angelus Novus,” was one of Benjamin’s most prized possessions, from 1921 when he obtained it, until his death in 1940. The painting was the source of inspiration for various themes in Benjamin’s work. For the moment, I would like to focus on two which are relevant to the theme of happiness.

In 1922 Benjamin composed a programmatic announcement for a journal he hoped, but finally failed, to found. The extreme instability of the German currency during the period of the Weimar Republic proved an impossible barrier to securing funding for the project.18 This journal of literary and philosophical criticism, had it come to fruition, was to be named, Angelus Novus. The unfulfilled task of the publication consisted in fostering an extreme contemporaneousness. On the model of the Athenäum journal of the Jena romantics, it would sacrifice even “unity and clarity” for the sake of this an almost esoteric “relevance to the present.”19 As Berndt Witte notes, Benjamin ultimately sought “to make the journal into the mouthpiece of a small circle united by esoteric religiosity.” 20 This group of contributors – which was to include Gershom Scholem, Ernst Bloch and Florens Christian Rang – would aim at a philosophical relevance and validity which could “lay claim to a place within future religious orders.”21 Such an achievement, however, was not to manifest itself in the publication of “those who imagine that they have already discovered the Arcanum.” Instead, Angelus Novus would “lend an ear to those...who objectively, dispassionately, and unobtrusively give expression to hardship and need.” The journal would be a place “reserved...for those who have found by hard thinking as much as by

20 Witte, *Benjamin*, 50.
21 SW1, 294.
soul searching that a renewal of things can come about only through confession.”\(^{22}\) By methods of critical investigation – which is to say, by means of a thoroughly *profane* pursuit of knowledge – these writings were to achieve the status of religious truth. As total as such an aspiration may have been, the task of the individual contributors to the journal, nonetheless, remained “to concentrate on the individual work of art.”\(^{23}\) Indeed, such a singular concentration was to be carried out to such an extent that criticism would come to be indistinguishable from *translation*.\(^{24}\)

Would there not be a contradiction between the journal’s aspiration to uncontested religious truth, on the one hand; and the characteristic unpretentiousness of the individual contributors, on the other? If such a truth were to become apparent, it would have to rest in a totality of some sort. This synthesis, such as it was, would have to lie with the editor – with Benjamin. With respect to his editorial task, Benjamin claims the following.

In fact, he [the editor] makes no claim to survey the intellectual horizons of the age from on high. And, to continue with the image, he would prefer that of the man who stands on his own threshold in the evening when his work is done and in the morning before he sets out on his daily tasks, and who takes in the familiar horizon with a glance, rather than scanning it searchingly, so as to retain whatever new thing greets him there.\(^{25}\)

Benjamin connects this editorial task – of perceiving the ephemeral truth in the sudden emergence of the new truth – not to mere preference, but to a philosophical method: “[t]he editor regards philosophy as his own special field.”\(^{26}\) This glance, though felicitous, was not merely arbitrary. But nor was it cast upon a naturally coherent configuration – i.e. the contributors did not exist in a relationship of “mutual understanding and of community.”\(^{27}\) Indeed, Benjamin

\(^{22}\) SW1, 295.  
\(^{23}\) SW1, 293.  
\(^{24}\) SW1, 294.  
\(^{25}\) SW1, 295.  
\(^{26}\) SW1, 295.  
\(^{27}\) SW1, 296.
claims, “[n]othing appears more important to the editor than that the journal should forgo all appearance and simply express the truth of the situation.”

The image Benjamin conjures in order to express this truth is that of the angel. He thus continues his announcement by reflecting on the “ephemeral aspect” of the journal.

According to a legend in the Talmud, the angels – who are born anew every instant in countless numbers – are created in order to perish and to vanish into the void, once they have sung their hymn in the presence of God. It is to be hoped that the name of the journal [Angelus Novus] will guarantee its contemporary relevance, which is the only true sort.

Thus concludes the statement which was to inaugurate a journal of philosophical and aesthetic criticism. Thus names the task of a new critical vanguard. But what could be the contemporary relevance of an infinite quantity of finite angels who long for nothing more than to raise a hymn before God and then to perish? Is it the case, as Witte notes, that “[i]n the last resort the Angelus Novus was not destined for human readers. Its editor’s intention was in fact that it should speak directly to God”?

Or is it the case that this is a hyper-theologization of Benjamin’s intentions?

In fact, what unites the heavenly creature and the earthbound critic is not a resonance which would make of the philosophical essay a mode of hymnody; but the will thereto would be the same. Fulfilment (for the angel) and the representation of truth (for the critic) are both to be located in the direction of the will to happiness. Indeed, in 1933 Benjamin will say of this very same angel and his intention to sing that “He wants happiness.” But he will also add an important nuance. The happiness in question should be understood dialectically: “the conflict in which the rapture of the unique, the, new, the yet unborn is combined with that bliss of

28 SW1, 296.
29 SW1, 296.
30 Witte, Benjamin, 51.
31 SW1, 296.
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experiencing something once more, of possessing once again, of having lived.”

The reasons for the dialectical rendering of the 1933 text, a short autobiographical piece composed in two versions over two consecutive days (and perhaps under the influence of hashish), are significant for making the connection to the profane happiness of the critic. The text, entitled “Agesilaus Santander,” ponders the relationship of the Klee painting to Benjamin himself. That is, he contemplates the possibility that this figure might be his personal angel; a heavenly counterpart to the profane life of the man. This time it is a text of Jewish mysticism which is said to be the source of the tale. “The Kaballah relates that, at every moment, God creates a whole host of angels, whose only task before they return to the void is to appear before his throne for a moment and sing his praises.” The way that this image is put to work is different in the later text. Because of the way Benjamin interprets Klee’s canvas as both the hymn-raising angel of the earlier text and as a personal or guardian angel, the angelic itinerary is altered. In taking up residence in Benjamin’s Berlin apartment, where the Klee painting hung for as long as it was in Benjamin’s possession, the winged figure was kept from his blissful task. “The new angel presented himself as such [as the hymn-raising angel] before naming himself. I only fear that I had kept him excessively long from his hymn.”

The angel’s will to sing his song before God – his hymnic happiness – is thwarted by way

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34 SW2, 712; 714.
35 Scholem offers the following context: “Everlasting angles like, say, the archangels or Satan, seen as the fallen angel of the Jewish and Christian tradition, were evidently less important for Benjamin than the Talmudic thee of the formation and disappearance of angles before God, of whom it is said in a kabbalistic book that they ‘pas away as the spark on the coals.’ To this, however, was added for Benjamin the further conception of Jewish tradition of the personal angel of each human being who represents the latter’s secret self and whose name nevertheless remains hidden from him.” *JJC*, 213.
36 SW2, 714.
of a “fatal detour.” He is forced to dwell among the fallen creation; a certain melancholy sets in. Indeed, Benjamin makes reference to his being born “under the sign of Saturn,” the planetary symbol of melancholy. But the will to happiness is not destroyed; it simply takes on another form. No longer is happiness identical with the “rapture of the unique, the, new, the yet unborn,” even if this figure of hymnic happiness is be preserved, negatively, in memory. The fatal detour which the vocation of a personal angel has imposed upon him now forces him to find happiness – a *melancholic happiness*, as it were – in “that bliss of experiencing something once more, of possessing once again, of having lived.” Such is the *dialectic of happiness* which will become central for the chapters that follow.

This dialectic occurs already in a series of notes that Benjamin composed in the late 1920s. There he says of the following with reference to the “will to happiness.”

Dialectics of happiness: a twofold will – the unprecedented, that which has never existed before, the pinnacle of bliss. Also: eternal repetition of the same situation, eternal restoration of the original, first happiness.

Already, in this elementary formulation of the dialectic, the play of singularity and repetition is seen to be the defining feature of the will to happiness. But it is in his 1929 essay on Marcel Proust that this dialectic is filled out. Here Benjamin speaks of “Proust’s blind, senseless, obsessive quest for happiness [*Glücksverlangen*]. It shone from his eyes; they were not happy, but in them lay happiness, just as it lies in gambling or in love.” Of Proust’s “heart-stopping, explosive will to happiness,” Benjamin says the following.

There is a dual will to happiness [*Glückswollen*], a dialectics of happiness: a hymnic form as well as an elegiac form [*Glücksgestalt*]. The one is the unheard-of, the unprecedented,
the height of bliss [Seligkeit]; the other, the eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original, first happiness [die ewige Restauration des ursprünglichen, ersten Glücks]. It is this elegiac idea of happiness – it could also be called Eleatic – which for Proust transforms existence into a preserve of memory [Erinnerung]. (SW 2:1, 239 [1929, revised 1934])

Proust demonstrates the dialectical will to happiness in a particularly striking way. His search for happiness is explicitly a “search for lost time. [A la recherche du temps perdu]”42 Much as his will was aimed toward the singular bliss, the hymnic happiness of the angel before God, his efforts, his writings, were oriented in precisely the opposite direction. If the angel looks ahead to a future – however brief – before the divine, then Proust sought the same rapturous possibility, but not in the future – and not even, properly speaking, in the past.43 That is, “not [in] a life as it actually was [wie es gewesen ist] but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it.”44

Before laying out the itinerary of this project, I would like to reflect briefly upon Benjamin’s final words on happiness. Here, in the second thesis of what has been called his “testamentary compendium,”45 his “On the Concept of History,” we find the claim about the indissoluble bond, or inalienable resonance, between the two terms. It is worth quoting Thesis II in full.

"It is one of the most noteworthy peculiarities of the human heart," writes Lotze, "that so much selfishness in individuals coexists with the general lack of envy which every present day feels toward its future." This observation indicates that the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned [verwiesen] us. There is happiness—such as could arouse envy in us—only in the

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42 This was the title of Proust’s semi-autobiographical novel which he composed in seven parts between 1913 – 1927. See In Search of Lost Time, trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor (7 Vols.) (New York: The Modern Library, 1992).

43 At least not in the past as it is understood by historicism: wie es gewesen ist. Cf. Benjamin in SW4, 391: “Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.” A translator’s note includes the following context. This is the historian's task as defined by Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), perhaps the leading German historian of the nineteenth century, whose scholarly method and way of teaching (he was the first to give seminars in history) had great influence on Western historiography. His work, which for Benjamin epitomizes nineteenth-century historicism, exhibits a bias against political and social change. (SW4, 398)

44 SW2, 238.

air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, the idea [Vorstellung] of happiness is indissolubly bound up [Or: resonates inalienably (schwingt... unveräußerlich)] with the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea [Vorstellung] of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred [verwiesen] to redemption. Doesn't a breath of the air that invaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there echo of now silent ones? Don't the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power [eine schwache messianische Kraft], a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this.  

The indissoluble bond between happiness and redemption is offered as a repetition and a paraphrase of a series of seemingly unrelated phenomena – the creaturely experience of breathing; the mundane sociality of speech; the earthly (and earthy) pleasure of sexual love. How is it that these are “other words” for the idea of happiness and its resonance with redemption? The clue is found in the verbal form of these profane acts: they appear in the subjunctive mood. That is, they are conditional, incomplete actions. The hypothetical conversation is one that “could have” happened, the sexual encounter is, likewise, one that might have, but in fact did not, take place. They exist as missed possibilities. “The kind of happiness that alone can prove itself,” says Werner Hamacher, “is not past happiness, it is the happiness that was possible in the past but was missed. Happiness is the festum post festum amissum.” Happiness is “assigned (verwiesen)” to redemption insofar as it is, or was, a possible happiness that was missed. As incomplete (in the past), it strives for completion (in the future) and in this way it displays the temporal structure Benjamin is interested in. Redemption comes to be the possible completion of

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40 SW4, 391.
47 See Benjamin, GS1.2, 691.
an incomplete happiness. 49

There is also a more explicitly political dimension to this later version of the happiness-redemption complex. That is, it betrays a concrete political commitment which is all but lacking in the “politics” Benjamin advocates in the early 1920s. The notion of assignation – of the past being assigned to the future and happiness being assigned to redemption – is also at work with respect to historical subjects: “our coming was expected on earth.” The “weak messianic force” that each present bears is activated by virtue of the incomplete happiness of the past. It is the messianic task of the present to complete the happiness of the past.

There is also a weak messianism at work in Benjamin’s first turn to politics, and I will attempt to make this clear in what follows, but these are different kinds of weakness. In this context weakness qualifies a messianism whose force is positive. Each generation is potentially messianic insofar as it acts as an arrow (to borrow the image Benjamin uses in the “Fragment”) that aims toward redemption – by acting as a kind of link between an incomplete past and a completed future. The direction of the profane, the possibility of historical action, in the earlier “Fragment” is only messianic insofar as its force is negative. Happiness in Thesis II is teleological – its attainment is coordinated with redemption. In a sense this is a happiness that aims toward bliss. To be sure this is, from the historical perspective, an unfulfilled and perhaps even unfulfillable telos. But what is not present here in the way it is in the “Fragment” is the negative dialectic which makes happiness the anti-messianic force which corresponds to redemption only by way of this negativity.

49 “What science has ‘determined,’” says Benjamin elsewhere, “remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete.” Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Harvard University Press, 1999), 471.
III. Summary of the Contents

Having surveyed various aspects of Benjamin’s concept of happiness, it is possible to offer a kind of preliminary typology of the dialectic of happiness. It will be the task of the dissertation to spell out, in more detail, an analysis of the terms and the character of their relationship.

What is perhaps most important is that happiness is conceived of as dialectically split because of a certain kind of failure. Paradise, the original bliss of humanity in relation to God and to nature is lost. The loss of bliss means on the one hand, that humanity will forever be driven by a will to that original bliss, and, in certain cases, may even achieve something approximating it: hymnic happiness. Examples of hymnic happiness are apparent in the Jewish image of the angel before God and in the pagan image of the Greek lyric poet who raises odes of victory to the Olympian gods. On the other hand, however, this loss can issues in an intensified focus on the failure as such. But here too happiness is at play and a certain pleasure or luck is possible – in elegiac happiness. The latter, according to Benjamin, is a decidedly modern and conspicuously Christian conception. This is why Benjamin will focus considerable attention on the 17th Century German Trauerspiel or “mourning play,” which is the site of a particularly Christian – Lutheran – modernity. We have already witnessed Paolo’s unfulfilled happiness, Benjamin’s own failed journal, and the rerouted angel. In these moments we encounter the reason for the foray into elegy.

If hymnic happiness is paradigmatically the will to an immediacy before the divine, a praise lifted before God, then elegiac happiness is a kind of earthly pleasure, achievable only by way of

50 See Chapter 1 below.
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the protracted ordeal of historical life, in the absence of God.\textsuperscript{51} If the hymn is singular – to be sung once before the angel disappears into the void – then the elegy is (eternally) repeatable.\textsuperscript{52} Benjamin will make precisely this point when he compares the tragedy of the Greeks – which carries a once-and-for-all or epochal import – to the \textit{Trauerspiel} of the German Baroque which is determined by repetition – both the repetition of ancient tragedy (hence the English translation of the title as \textit{The Origin of the German Tragic Drama}) and “the endless repletion of scenes of martyrdom”\textsuperscript{53} with which it was fascinated.

If the hymn is raised in the hope of an eternal present, where there is no gap between experience and redemption, then elegy is turned, at different points, either toward the future, to \textit{the hope of redemption}, or more often toward the past, to the \textit{slim chance of rescue}. Indeed, consider perhaps the most well-known of Benjamin’s reflections on Klee’s angel: the angel of history, who, although not satanic, has still fallen.\textsuperscript{54} Of this angel he says that he “seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. \textit{His face is turned toward the past.”}\textsuperscript{55}

Likewise, this turn toward the past is apparent in Proust’s search for lost time and the German

\textsuperscript{51} Below it will be shown why this claim does not conflict with the claim of the specifically Christian provenance of the \textit{Trauerspiel}.

\textsuperscript{52} On this point it is interesting to note a generic aspect of elegy. David Kennedy, in his book, \textit{Elegy}, comments on one of the earliest known elegies, “The Affliction of Daphnis,” dating from the beginning of the second century BCE. It occurs in within the “First Idyll” of a collection of poems by the Greek Bucolic poet, Theocritus. “The opening of Theocritus’s poem...portrays funeral elegy as a competitive genre. [An] unnamed goatherd promises Thrys [the purported author of the elegy] the prize of [a] cup if he can sing ‘The Affliction of Daphnis’ as well as he did in a recent contest with Chromis of Libya.” From this Kennedy concludes on a point that is relevant to Benjamin’s use of the term elegy. Namely, “[e]legies...are forms that are repeated and repeatable.” David Kennedy, \textit{Elegy} (London: Routledge, 2007), 13. Emphasis added.


\textsuperscript{54} It is Scholem’s basic, and I believe mistaken, intention to read the angel of “Agesilaus Santander,” as “Angelus Satanas.” See Scholem, “\textit{JJC.}"

\textsuperscript{55} SW4, 392
Lutherans longing for "a golden age of peace and culture, free of any apocalyptic features."\[^{56}\]

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With a sense of Benjamin’s will to happiness and the metapolitics of decay which is informed by it, it is possible to chart the itinerary of what follows. Chapter Two marks out the limits of the profane, according to Benjamin’s own interpretation of fallen nature. Here the play of bliss and melancholy is metaphysically inscribed into the structure of divine creation. This fall, however, was not so much a moral as a linguistic failure. The biblical account of creation in the book of Genesis presents, for Benjamin, the departure of humanity from “the blissful Adamite spirit of language,”\[^{57}\] the immediacy of the “name” which is spoken first by God and then by Adam, finally gives way to the alienated domain of the “human word.” The consequence is the “overnaming” of nature, the repetition of signifying failure that produces melancholy – both the sorrow of the namer (humanity) and of the named (nature). The limits imposed by this linguistic failure are the presupposition for a theory of historical action. This theory consists, most basically, in a refusal of illusion. It seeks neither a return to a mythical golden age nor escape to an unworldly future – even if these mythical figures will retain a complicated normative force. But nor will it accept the mitigated pleasures of bourgeois culture, which is yet another illusion of happiness. For Benjamin, if the heights of bliss and the depths of despair are not considered in their most stubborn and extreme possibilities, then justice will not have been done to the idea of happiness. The occasion for this metaphysical interpretation of language is the Great War. In 1916, after witnessing his mentors engage in patriotic support for the war effort, an initial form of protest was registered in his reinterpretation of the nature and possibilities of language.

\[^{56}\] OGT, 80.
\[^{57}\] SW1
Chapters Three and Four pursue the theme of happiness as they are analyzed in Benjamin’s habilitation thesis on the German *Trauerspiel* or “mourning play.” While happiness is not the central concern of the project, it does play a significant role. Indeed, *Trauer* and *Spiel* (“mourning” and “play”) can both be seen to point, in different ways, to the theme of happiness. In any case, Benjamin’s examination of German Baroque “tragedy” begins with its ancient counterpart – in part in order to emphasize the difference between the antique and the modern. One of the consistent themes of the tragedy of ancient Greece is the tragic hero’s overcoming of the misfortune (*Unglück*) which fate had imposed upon him – even if this came about at the “tragic” cost of his own death. The hero does not so much demythologize, as immanently disrupt the continuity of mythical guilt which fate imposes. In this way, a possibility for happiness is exposed, even if the hero himself must die in order to reveal it. Happiness becomes a possibility...for the future.

Things change in the Baroque appropriation of the tragic, but happiness is still discernable. It is displayed, for Benjamin, in the allegorical perspective of the Protestant playwrights of the German Baroque. Owing to the overwhelming historical experience of the Thirty Years War, the “mourning plays,” which were composed in this period – which were a kind of Christianized repetition of Greek tragedy – pose neither the possibility of a victorious tragic hero, nor of the classically Christian idea of redemption as the culmination of a *Heilsgeschichte*. Instead, it was the unflinching gaze of the melancholic upon a fallen and decaying creation – natural and historical – which provided the early modern playwrights with a certain “diversion” or happiness. As ruin and decay, sundered from any natural goodness, the melancholic poets could reconfigure these fragments into new constellations. There was a slim hope in a final redemption. But the path from fallen to redeemed creation – from elegiac to
hymnic happiness – could only be imaged as apotheosis; whereby the allegorical itself might finally become allegory, under the gaze of God.

These critical engagements with the metaphysics of language, on the one hand, and of tragic drama, on the other, do not address themselves to the issue of politics. And yet, the political, or metapolitical, significance of these metaphysical reflections – and the specific role of happiness therein – point in the direction of a metapolitics of decay. Thus, the final chapter seeks to trace the movement from the metapolitics of decay to the politics of transience. I will proceed, first of all, by closely analyzing Benjamin’s “Theologico-Political Fragment.” The “Fragment” will then be read in comparison with another contemporary document which also advocates a certain politics of transience. The second document is the text of a lecture by the Swiss Protestant theologian, Karl Barth. In staging this (missed) moment of Jewish-Christian dialogue, certain elements of the content and the context of Benjamin’s politics of transience will become clearer.
Chapter 2: The Pre-Historical Loss of Bliss

I. The Fall of European Culture

In important respects, Benjamin’s 1916 essay, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” to which I will turn momentarily, can be read as a critique of the Great War. The fact that Benjamin’s critique of the German military effort took the implicit form of an esoteric essay on language is explained, in part, by his friend Gershom Scholem. He describes Benjamin’s disposition during the period after the outbreak of the war as one of melancholy, but also a determined silence. If one wanted to maintain a friendship with Benjamin, claims Scholem, one had to learn (as Scholem did) to deal with “a secretiveness bordering on mystery mongering.” Such furtiveness applied especially to matters political. Scholem describes Benjamin’s “utter aversion to discussing the political events of the day and occurrences of the war.” This silence (which was not total as Scholem assures us: “we did discuss our basic attitude toward the war, but concrete events were never mentioned”), should not be interpreted as a willful ignorance or a complete divestment from contemporary states of affairs. It is possible to read this refusal to speak as a commitment to a particular form of political resistance.

In 1913 Benjamin had made reference to the unfortunate situation of the epochal impotency – and simultaneous ubiquity – of silence. “This epoch does not have a single form

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1 SW1.
2 Scholem, Friendship, 30.
3 Scholem, Friendship, 31.
4 Scholem, Friendship, 31.
5 It would not be commensurate to Jacob Taubes’ claim to have “no spiritual commitment to the world as it is.” Jacob Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford University Press, 2003), 103.
which permits us silent expression. But we feel ourselves enslaved by speechlessness. We despise the facile irresponsibility of written expression.” This desire for an expressive silence will find fuller expression in the “Language” essay. But Benjamin’s reticence to speak (as well as his melancholy) may also owe something to an event from a few years earlier which left a lasting impression on him. In a paradigmatic act of silent protest, his good friend from the Youth Movement, Fritz Heinle immolated himself in opposition to the war. Despite his sadness, Benjamin invested this act with precisely the expressiveness and moral import which he saw lacking in the speechlessness of his era.

Another explanation for Benjamin’s principled silence could be attributed to what he saw as the failure of all presently existing forms of expression. Such a failure was legible not just in the manifestly bankrupt chorus of war enthusiasm, but it also emerged from quarters Benjamin would have previously found important in Germany: namely, in the certain segments of the Youth Movement and in post-assimilationist Judaism. Benjamin felt himself betrayed, in the former case, by Gustave Wyneken, the leader of the Berlin Free Student Movement and Benjamin’s mentor. In the latter case, it was Martin Buber, an extremely important figure in the “renaissance of Jewish culture” in the Weimar Republic, who disappointed Benjamin. In both cases, the unfortunate decision to support the war was compounded by the deplorable decision to provide this very war with a metaphysical justification.

Benjamin’s letter to Wyneken in March 1915 makes his attitude to his former mentor’s decision very clear: “With these lines I am totally and unconditionally disassociating myself

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7 See Rabinbach, “Enlightenment,” 104.
The letter came in response to a tract that Wyneken published at the end of 1914. *Youth and War* betrayed what Benjamin saw as Wyneken’s greatest insights into the spiritual potential of youth. The radicalism of Wyneken’s idealism, which is what Benjamin was drawn to, ultimately failed him when he “sacrificed young people to the state.” Benjamin thus saw the Youth Movement’s leader’s betrayal of the young as the moment to “wrest” the legacy from him, never to look back.

In the case of Buber, the reaction is less frank, but no less definitive. Buber invited Benjamin to contribute the journal he had founded that year, *Der Jude*. “During its eight years of existence,” notes Michael Brenner, this journal “became the most important intellectual forum of modern German Jewry,” publishing the likes of Kafka and Gustav Landauer – both of whom Benjamin respected immensely. What then, would explain Benjamin’s final refusal to contribute?

In a letter responding to Buber’s request Benjamin refers to the strong disagreement he felt toward the contributors to the first volume; and “especially their position on the European war.” But it was not, finally, the political, but the *metaphysical* commitments of the journal and its editor, which constitutes the basis for Benjamin’s refusal. Benjamin took aim at the politics of the *Der Jude* by critiquing its implicit theory of language; in particular, the way in which writing can be put to political use.

The opinion is widespread, and prevails almost everywhere as axiomatic, that writing can influence the moral world and human behavior, in that it places the motives behind actions at our disposal. Benjamin attributes such a perspective to Buber and his apparently ill-founded hope in the political potential of a journal. This view of (political) writing makes language “only one means

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9 Benjamin, Cor, 75.
10 Benjamin, Cor., 76.
12 Benjamin, Cor, 79.
13 Benjamin, Cor, 79.
of more or less suggestively *laying the groundwork* for the motives that determine the person's actions in his heart of hearts.” Such an instrumentalization of language misses the deepest metaphysical potential of the word vis-a-vis deed; one “in which the former would not be the instrument of the latter.” When the relation is limited to one of an “arithmetic process” it loses the “magic” or the “immediacy” that Benjamin sees as essential. The instrumentalization of language is bad, but becomes “even more catastrophic where the entire relationship between word and deed is... [understood] as a mechanism for the realization of the true absolute, as is the case among us now.” The “catastrophic” instrumentalization of language which Benjamin has in mind would seem to be Buber’s own. In the early days of the war, Buber “thought that the heroic mood in Germany had ‘initiated an epoch of unconditioned action in which one realizes one’s *Erlebnisse* in their fullness and thereby gains “a connectedness with the Absolute.” Buber even went so far as to see the tragedy of war as being of ‘marginal import compared to the war’s metaphysical significance.’” Again, in lieu of an explicit criticism of Buber’s own enthusiasm for the war, a perspective Buber would come to regret, Benjamin attempts to undermine the linguistic basis by which such enthusiasm attempts to translate itself into politics.

What Benjamin proposes instead, and what he portrays as the reason for his refusal to contribute to a journal that misunderstands this point, is that language effects action in the world not in terms of a *content* which it might signify and which might motivate action in a *subject*. The historical effectiveness of language will not occur “through the transmission of content, but rather through the purest disclosure of its dignity and its nature.” Language, while it can be political, is not to be seen as a tool which can be deployed by and for a subject. Thus, Benjamin

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14 Benjamin, Cor, 80.
16 Benjamin, *Cor*, 80.
calls his concept of language “objective.”

My concept of objective and, at the same time, highly political style and writing is this: to awaken interest in what was denied to the word; only where this sphere of speechlessness reveals itself in unutterably pure power can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating deed, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides.¹⁷

This conception of language issues in two consequences in this context. The first consequence is that the relationship between word and deed is a mystical or magical one. In a privileged sense, it is the prophets, the poets and the psalmists who disclose this mysticism of language. But the second consequence is that an intellectual journal is not a prophecy, a poem or a hymn and it should not mistake itself for such. If a journal is to encourage and not undermine the magical relation between word and deed, it must do so in a manifestly non-prophetic, non-poetic, and non-hymnic manner. The profane human (subjective) word will fail, inevitably, to motivate authentic historical actions. Insofar as it does not recognize the profane limitations of its expression – i.e. of its non-prophetic, poetic, or hymnic form – such limitation will be its constantly repeated destiny. If however, a certain sobriety can be summoned; a lack of illusion about its nature, there may still be a place for political writing. With respect to the linguistic and political possibilities of an intellectual journal, Benjamin offers Buber the following consolation: “The only thing at issue is objective writing. Whether a journal will achieve it cannot be humanly foreseen, and probably not many journals have done so.”¹⁸ Thus, in the end, Benjamin concludes that he cannot contribute to Buber’s journal because he is “just as incapable of composing writing designed to have an effect as I am of understanding it.”¹⁹ The problem of Der Jude, from Benjamin’s perspective, is that it lacked a proper metaphysics of language. The “Language” essay sets out to provide a corrective to the “bourgeois” conception of language of Buber and

¹⁷ Benjamin, Cor, 80.
¹⁸ Benjamin, Cor, 81. One example of a journal who has achieved this, claims Benjamin, is the Athenaeum journal of the early Romantics.
¹⁹ Benjamin, Cor, 81.
II. The Creation and Fall of Language

“The life of man in the pure spirit of language was blissful.”

In the book of Genesis Benjamin discerns, not so much a myth about the origins of the material world as a linguistic ontology.20 “The Bible,’ he says, is “initially indispensible” for spelling this out. What both the Bible and Benjamin presuppose is “language as ultimate reality,” which is “perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical.”21 The metaphysics of language which is cultivated out of this narrative soil, furthermore, is bound up, in a peculiar way, with the play of bliss and melancholy. In this regard, apart from the biblical text, Benjamin refers to the work of Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788). It is partly in reference to Hamann that the matter of happiness, in this case, bliss (Selig), becomes central to the account of creation and to Benjamin’s metaphysics of language.22 Hamann’s theory of language is derived from a sustained critical response to Enlightenment thought – in particular as it found expression in the work of his friend Immanuel Kant. Kant’s epistemology, Hamann argued, did not give sufficient attention to the linguistically mediated nature of all human knowledge. Indeed, according to Hamann, “every phenomenon of nature was a word.”23

20 There are technically two stories of creation in Genesis: Genesis 1 is the first, chapters 2 and 3 constitute a second separate story, insofar as the same events are narrated in a different way. Benjamin acknowledges the difference between the two accounts but effectively attempts to harmonize them.
21 SW1, 67.
22 The use of the term “bliss” is usually, though not always, reserved for the “hymnic” dimension of happiness. This is fitting as the term Selig usually carries the sense of “blessed.” In the present context, which is to say the prelapsarian moment of the argument, bliss is a fitting term.
23 Johann Georg Hamann, Writings on Philosophy and Language, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge University Press,
Hamann’s theory of language would emerge, furthermore, through his interventions into the 18th debate about the origins of language. It was developed as a response to Johann Gottfried von Herder’s (1744 –1803) celebrated Treatise on the Origin of Language (1772). Herder, also a friend of Hamann’s, claimed a necessary place for language in all acts of human cognition, but it was to be seen as derived from a natural as opposed to a supernatural source. “In this way,” says Herder, “language becomes a natural organ of the understanding, a sense of the human soul.”

For, to see language as having anything but a natural connection to the one who uses it would be to deprive it of its status of an “organ of the understanding.” It would cease to be the immanent source of understanding, and become an alien – even if angelic – “offprint.”

If an angel or heavenly spirit had invented language, how could it be otherwise than that language’s whole structure would have to be an offprint of this spirit’s manner of thought, For by what else could I recognize a picture that an angel had painted than by the angelic quality, the supernatural quality of its traits? But where does that happen in the case of our language? Structure and layout, yes, even the first foundation stone of this palace, betrays humanity!

For Hamann, however, this was a mistaken way to frame the debate. While to understand the human as a naturally linguistic being could not be denied, nor could the fact that “everything is divine,” including language. Hamann took issue with Herder’s dualism: supernature, for Hamann, need not negate nature. Indeed, “Everything divine... is also human, because man can neither act nor suffer but by the analogy of his nature, however simple or complex a machine it is

2007), 108.
25 Herder, Origin, 134.
26 “Hamann, despite his friendship with Herder, thought that the debate was foolish and its terms (natural vs. supernatural) hopelessly compromised. For him, the proponent of the supernatural version of the origin of language (viz., Süßmilch) hides under a blanket and shouts “Here’s God!,” while the naturalist Herder walks onto the stage and says, “Look, I am a man!” (Werke, 3, 17).” From the translators introduction to Hamann, Writings, xxii. Similarly, “His intention had been to steer a middle course between the extreme supernaturalism of Süßmilch (whose understanding of the origin of language involved divine instruction on the order of a deus ex machina) and the extreme naturalism of Condillac and Rousseau (who argued that the development of language was more or less natural to any creature of feeling). John Betz, After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J.G. Hamann (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 141.
The divine origin of language need not alienate it from the natural structures of human understanding. The “instruments of language,” as Hamann called them, the grammar, as it were, of human language was certainly of natural provenance. But there was more to language than this. “To speak is to translate – from an angelic language into a human language, that is, to translate thoughts into words, – things into names...” Language could indeed be angelic and yet rest in man as something more other than an “offprint,” and it is not only the Bible which expresses this analogy.

if a higher being or an angel (as in the case of Balaam’s ass) is going to take effect through our tongues, any such effect, as with the talking animals in Aesop’s fables, must be expressed in analogy with human nature, and in this respect neither the origin of language nor, even less, the progress of language can seem or be anything but human.

Hamann’s theological conception of language, which holds the natural and the supernatural together, finds its preeminent source, not surprisingly, in the Bible. Here, in the creation account of Genesis, the linguistic essence of all things is presented with a particular clarity. Hamann describes Adam’s non-alienated immersion in the divine word of creation.

All that man heard at the beginning, saw with his eyes, looked upon, and his hands handled was a living word; for God was the word.

With this citation we are lead back to Benjamin, and his belated amendment to the Berlin debate. In 1916 Benjamin juxtaposes, on the one hand, this section of Hamann’s commentary, which links the human relationship to divine language – paradigmatically manifested in the act of

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28 Hamann, from “Aesthetics in Nuce,”(1762) in Writings, 66.
29 Hamann, “The Knight...”, Writings, 100.
30 The Christological allusion is intentional for Hamann. As Betz notes, this was something Herder lost in his naturalistic interpretation. That is, “he had failed to appreciate the irreducibly Christological, i.e., human and divine, character of language.” After Enlightenment, 144. In the case of Benjamin, we can assume that the Christological dimension of Hamann is intentionally occluded.
31 Hamann, Writings, 109.
32 Cited in SW1, 70.
naming – with play, with a child’s game (Spiel); and, on the other hand, a citation from the painter and Stürm und Drang poet, Fredrich “Maler” Müller (1749-1825). He refers in particular, to the latter’s poem, “Adam’s First Awakening and First Blissful Nights.”

The nights that Müller describes were blissful precisely because they were spent in uninterrupted communication with the divine. God has the creatures come before Adam so that he might name them: “Man of the earth, step near; in gazing, grow more perfect, more perfect through word,” reads the line that Benjamin cites. Thus, the purported naturalness of Adam’s intercourse with divine creation – having been “released from the same creative word” as the creatures – is what allows the first man to know and name creation all at once: “in man,” Benjamin says, language becomes both “knowledge and name in blissful mind.”

In the book of Genesis, therefore, we find less a story of the created world, and more one of the linguistic essence (Wissen) which conditions it. What Benjamin discerns is a kind of hierarchy of linguistic types, manifested paradigmatically by each of the three main characters in the story which have been mentioned already – God, man, and nature. There would be divine language which creates, human language which names, and the language of nature – which, though mute, is still language, according to Benjamin.

**God’s Creative Word; Adam’s Knowing Word; Nature’s Mute Word**

The pre-historical expression of divine language admits of no distance between speech and reality. “In the word creation took place,” says Benjamin, “and God’s linguistic being is the word.” Benjamin describes the rhythm of God’s creative action in Genesis 1 thus: “Let there be

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33 Benjamin will make much of the connection between Spiel and happiness. See Below, Chapter 3.
34 SW1, 70.
35 SW1, 70.
36 SW1, 70.
37 SW1, 68.
– He made (created) – He named.” What such a rhythm reveals is “the deep and clear relation of the creative act to language.” The divine speech, says Benjamin, begins the creative process with word (“let there be…”) and finishes creation with name (“and he called…”). Word and name cohere in the “linguistic being” of God. “In God,” he says, “name is creative because it is word, and God’s word is cognizant because it is name.” For God, language does not signify, it brings into being: God’s word is immediately creative and God’s naming is immediately cognizant. “The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God; only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge. This means that God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge.”

What would it mean for man to name? What share does Adam have in the language of God? God creates the first human, and passes on the gift of speech and task of naming the rest of created nature which had not been named already. This new moment in the creative process is signaled, claims Benjamin, by a break in the narrative rhythm.

In the creation of man, the threefold rhythm of the creation of nature has given way to an entirely different order. In it, therefore, language has a different meaning: the trinity of the act is here preserved, but in this very parallelism the divergence is all the more striking, in the threefold “He created” of 1:27. (SW1, 68).
striking, in the threefold “He created” of 1:27.\textsuperscript{44} God does not create the human according to the same formula as had been used in the creation of nature. As Benjamin notes, “God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him, He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language, which had served him as medium of creation, free.”\textsuperscript{45} The creation of the human is, in a certain sense, unfinished – insofar as he is not named. The task of finishing creation – of naming – thus falls to him. Not as an autonomous will, however, but as an extension of the linguistic being of God. “God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge.”\textsuperscript{46}

For the human it is no longer a matter of speaking creation into being, but of naming the already created in accordance with a peculiar kind of knowledge – a (prelapsarian) “perfect knowledge [vollkommen erkennende],” Benjamin says.\textsuperscript{47} Man is the “knower” on an analogy with God as “creator.” And this is the sense in which man is understood as being made in the “image” of God – he participates in the same linguistic being. If God created with word and knew with name, it is only the latter which is passed on to the human. In this way the human is placed in a hierarchy of relations below God (in that he is created by God) and above nature (in that he is given the power to name it). Whereas God creates, with word, and confirms, in name (i.e. “it was good”), the whole of nature, the human names creation by virtue of an attentiveness

\textsuperscript{44} SW1, 68. Gen 1:27 reads as follows: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” The “trinity of the act” which Benjamin refers to consists in the triple occurrence of the verb bārā, “to create.” The absence of the name in this formulation is what Benjamin finds significant – the recurring “and God called (named)...” is conspicuously lacking here.

\textsuperscript{45} SW1, 68. Presumably the claim that “God did not create man from the word,” is based on the fact that the “let there be...” formula is lacking in Gen 1:26. However, the verse does say “Let us make man in our image.” Whatever the sense of 1:26, Benjamin’s point in making the claim is to emphasize the immediate nature of human origin vis-à-vis God. Benjamin says that “the making of man did not take place through the word: God spoke-and there was. But this man, who is not created from the word, is now invested with the gift of language and is elevated above nature.” SW1, 67-68.

\textsuperscript{46} SW1, 68.

\textsuperscript{47} SW1, 71.
to the name which is, as it were, already encoded in each creature. In a process Benjamin calls “almost sublime,” “God gives each beast in turn a sign, whereupon they step before man to be named.” This is why Benjamin claims that Adam’s naming is “removed from play or caprice.”

The human becomes the site where the divine-creative power of the word is left to finish its work. Adam is not an independent cognizing subject – not yet – but a speaking, naming creature set above nature. The human task is to name creation according to the word of God which it already is.

In name, the word of God has remained creative; it has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language. Thus fertilized, it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth.

Adam’s naming of creation issues not from a spontaneous subjectivity, but from the translation of the “mute magic of nature” – by giving voice to a voiceless creation.

Human language, while superior to the silent language of nature, is still not divine language. As created, it is, we might say, anticipating our larger argument, a weak mode of the creative power of the divine. This is by no means to say that it is a parody – not yet – only that it is constitutively weak.”

All human language is only the reflection of the word in name. The name is no closer to the word than knowledge is to creation. The infinity of all human language always remains limited and analytic in nature, in comparison to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word.

Of the three languages – divine, human, and (mute) nature – only the “Adamite spirit of language” is “blissful.” The reason for this, in short, is that God is beyond bliss and nature is below it. Bliss, like hymnic happiness, is characterized by a proximity to the divine; as a

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48 SW1, 70.
49 SW1, 69.
50 SW1, 68.
51 SW1, 71.
possibility that happens “before God.” In other words, bliss emerges as the experience of overcoming the distance that separates man – and nature – from God. More precisely, it is the experience that precedes the alienation of creation from the creator in the fall of language. God has no need of overcoming this distance and nature’s proximity to the divine is mediated, its access to bliss becomes, not so much lost as saved in translation. Nature participates, to a certain extent in the “blissful Adamite spirit of language,” but only as that which is named by man. And this, as Benjamin notes, is not exactly a joyful lot. “To be named – even when the namer is godlike and blissful – perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning.”

Nature’s essence is no less linguistic than man’s. But whereas man received language as a gift, nature received it as a certain imposition; for it was created by divine word. But nonetheless it cannot speak; and thus the need for the human translator. Man speaks on nature’s behalf.

The translation of the language of things into that of man is not only a translation of the mute into the sonic; it is also the translation of the nameless into the name. It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more prefect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely, knowledge.

It is for this reason – that “the translation of the nameless into the name” is a qualitative move toward perfection – that Benjamin claims that it is “necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory.” This concept of translation – of translatability – has its deepest root in the divine. It is this metaphysical-linguistic fact, that God created not just man, but things as well, that makes the task of translation possible. For it would otherwise be

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52 SW1, 71.
53 SW1, 73. At this point it is worth mentioning another aspect of the privilege of naming. Benjamin notes that “[o]f all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name” (69). That is, Adam names not only the animals, thereby displaying and exercising his privilege, but he also names the woman: in 2:23 he names her “woman [isha]” (even if God had already created isha in 2:22, thus making Adam’s name redundant); in 3:20, she is named “Eve.” On this issue of gender – and the analogy between woman and mourning nature – see Irving Wohlfarth, “On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin” in Andrew E. Benjamin, ed., The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989), 157-216.
54 SW1, 70.
55 SW1, 70.
“insoluble,”

were not the name-language of man and the nameless language of things related in God and released from the same creative word, which in things became the communication of matter in magic communion, and in man the language of knowledge and name in blissful mind.  

All would appear to be well, then, even despite the “intimation of mourning” reflected in nature’s subjection to the “godlike and blissful” namer, man. However, we are still in the prelapsarian paradise of language. What comes of language when it is alienated from its source in the divine word? Mourning is one thing, but “how much more melancholy it is to be named not from the one blessed paradisiacal language of names, but from the hundred languages of man?”

**The Fall of Language**

In Benjamin one finds what might be called a strong doctrine of the fall. However, his is far removed from the traditional Christian renderings of such doctrines. In keeping with his approach, Benjamin’s fall is not primarily moral, but linguistic. On his reading, a new “human word [menschlichen Wortes]” arises in the course of the Genesis narrative as a parody of the original language of the name. When the first couple concedes to the shrewd reasoning of the serpent and they eat of the fruit of the forbidden “Tree of the Knowledge” [Baumes der Erkenntnis] of Good and Evil.”

What transpires is not, according to Benjamin, an increase in the quantity of knowledge already present in creation – a knowledge whose objects would be good and evil. God had already created – with word – and confirmed – with name – the whole of

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56 SW1, 70. Put otherwise: all of creation has linguistic being by virtue of its share in the divine word, but whereas man partakes of this word through God’s gift of language – the name-language which was originally God’s – nature partakes of it by virtue of its being created from the divine word ("Let there be...") and named by the ("godlike and blissful") word of man – which needs to be distinguished from the postlapsarian “human word.”

57 SW1, 73.

58 SW1, 71 GS 2.1, 53.

59 In fact, it is only the woman who speaks with the serpent. See Genesis 3:1-6. In the exchange between the serpent and the woman, interestingly, the woman does not even utter the word “knowledge” [da’at]. She speaks only of “the tree in the midst of the Garden,” even though God had, in the prohibition, called the tree by name. The serpent, however, in a single short verse (3:5), twice uses the verb “to know” [yada]: for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.
nature. His confirming name: “it was good.” It is by virtue of this confirmation that Benjamin claims, “the language of Paradise was fully cognizant [vollkommen erkennend].” For, “on the seventh day, God had already cognized [erkannt] with the words of creation. And God saw it was good.” Thus, there was not a finite quantity of knowledge which the Tree of Knowledge would come to supplement. Instead, a different – fallen – order of knowledge, signaled by the term Wissen, as opposed to Erkenntnis, intrudes into the order of “perfect knowledge.” This is a knowledge (Wissen) that “abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word.” It breaks open the “immanent magic” of creation and becomes “externally magic.”

In this new order of knowledge, qua Wissen, where something comes to be which lacks a name, language is forced into a new role; a gap opens up between signifier and signified. Language, one which has “stepped out of name-language,” must now communicate an estranged content.

The word must communicate something (other than itself) In that fact lies the true Fall of the spirit of language. The word as something externally communicating, as it were a parody – by the expressly mediate word – of the expressly immediate, creative word of God, and the decay of the blissful Adamite spirit of language that stands between them. For in reality there exists a fundamental identity between the word that, after the promise of the snake, knows good and evil, and the externally communicating word.

Underlying this interpretation of the fall of language, a fall from bliss into melancholy, is a Kabalistic reading of the significance of the Tree of Knowledge. It is worth noting Gershom Scholem’s insight into the fundamental meaning of the fall, as discussed in the last section of the collection of Jewish mystical writings called the Zohar. The introduction of differentiation into

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60 SW1, 71.
61 SW1, 71.
62 SW1, 71.
63 SW1, 71.
64 SW1, 71.
an otherwise unified creation under the themes of good and evil is the basic effect of the fall. Scholem says that “under the rule of this Tree [of Knowledge], the world contains differentiated spheres: the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure, the permitted and the forbidden, the living and the dead, the divine and the demonic.” A consequence of this general reign of differentiation, according to Benjamin’s extension of this idea to language, is a linguistic rending of form from content. Language no longer communicates immediately as name, but communicates something else.

The knowledge of things resides in the name, whereas that of good and evil is, in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard uses the word, “prattle [Geschwätz],” and knows only one purification and elevation, to which the prattling man, the sinner, was therefore submitted: judgment [das Gericht, lit. court].

With the introduction of the foreign (nameless) elements of “good” and “evil,” the prelapsarian linguistic purity was unsettled, name as the blissful unity of word and thing now existed in a linguistic universe which included the “human word.” The human word did not participate in the “immanent magic” of the name; it existed in a relationship to its object which was contingent, even arbitrary. Prattle, which did not name, but “overnamed” things was to be man’s lot – were it not for another divine word. “In the Fall, since the eternal purity of names was violated, the sterner purity of the judging word [das richtende Wort] arose.” Judgment is the postlapsarian reinstatement of identity between word and thing. That is, “in exchange for the immediacy of name that was damaged by it, a new immediacy arises: the magic of judgment, which no longer rests blissfully in itself.” The word of judgment overcomes prattle and becomes unequivocal. God is not limited by the fall of language in the same way as speaking man and mute nature, but

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65 Scholem, Messianic Idea, 23.
66 SW1, 71. And even before Kierkegaard, Hamann had gotten around to the same point in his claim about the divinity of language. For Hamann, recall “everything is divine,” furthermore, “the question of the origin of evil amounts in the end to word-play and scholastic prattle.” Hamann, Writings, 99.
67 SW1, 71.
68 SW1, 71-72. Emphasis added.
in order to communicate with a now alienated creation, God will speak to and not simply with it. God “magically” overcomes the distance of mediation and abstraction and utters a commanding word, despite differentiation – of curse and expulsion (Gen 3:14f). The judging word, as it were, forces signifier and signified together again and makes nameless abstractions – good and evil – immediately communicable. It is, in a new sense, a “knowledge” of good and evil. There is thus the paradoxical emergence of an immediate linguistic access to abstraction which occurs in the divine judgment.

This immediacy in communication of abstraction came into being as judgment, when, in the Fall, man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete – that is, name – and fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle….The Tree of Knowledge stood in the garden of God not in order to dispense information on good and evil, but as an emblem of judgment over the questioner. This immense irony marks the mythic origin of law.69

The “immense irony” of which Benjamin speaks, presumably, is the following: The Tree of Knowledge presents itself as a symbol of potential human ascendancy toward – or even equality with – the divine according to the reasoning of the serpent (“for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” [Gen 3.5]); in fact, however, what it does is open the way for an otherwise unnecessary divine judgment upon creation. With the circulation of abstraction within language and the new immediacy required to communicate it (judgment), the lot of humanity does not become more divine, but “all too human.” The postlapsarian emergence of judgment is a kind of necessary evil. Law, in this sense, is of divine origin, but it is not of the same sublime and blissful order of immediacy that is original creation – it is the mythical necessity introduced in the wake of differentiation and broken immediacy. Prelapsarian creation was also pre-mythical. It knew no difference between the immediate and the mediate and thus no transgression of the distinction

69 SW1, 72.
which characterizes the mythical.

To humanity, however, even this broken immediacy is beyond it – though, as we shall see, the approximation of divine judgment (i.e. justice) in law will be a recurring question for Benjamin. Empty “prattle” would be all that is left to a fallen humanity. There is a constitutive and unbridgeable distance between the human word of judgment (i.e. law) and the divine.

“Before God’s gaze,” says Irving Wohlfarth, “earthly justice shrinks into insignificance.”

The story of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) illustrates the aggregated reproduction of the reality of prattle.71

Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed. There is, in the relation of human languages to that of things, something that can be approximately described as “overnaming” – the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all deliberate muteness. Overnaming as the linguistic being of melancholy points to another curious relation of language: the overprecision that obtains in the tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers.72

The name-giving task that God had set to work in humanity does not cease to name, it simply losses access to “blissful unity” of language of paradise. The nominative force which no longer corresponds to any being will go on naming, and naming, and naming…

The linguistic theory elaborated from Benjamin’s reading of the book of Genesis traced the metaphysical descent of the linguistic being of man from the bliss of naming to the melancholic repetition of overnaming. While it was the human word that exemplified bliss in its immediacy to God, it is nature which stands as an exemplar of melancholy – in being

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71 SW1, 72.
72 SW1, 73.
On The Metapolitics of Decay – Chapter 2: The Pre-Historical Loss of Bliss

overnamed. “The life of man in the pure spirit of language, says Benjamin, was blissful. Nature, however, is mute.”

Benjamin once again appeals to Maler Müller who “has Adam say of the animals that leave him after he has named them, ‘And saw by the nobility with which they leaped away from me that the man had given them a name.’” Confined to the conditions of paradise, this muteness of nature, Benjamin imagines, might even be seen as a mitigated bliss – “a bliss …of a lower degree.” There is an element of “nobility [Adel]” in their subjection to the name. “After the Fall, however, when God's word curses the ground [Acker], the appearance of nature is deeply changed. Now begins its other muteness, which is what we mean by the ‘deep sadness of nature.’” At this point Benjamin spins a beautiful and dense passage about the mournfulness of nature. It is worth quoting at length.

It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament [klagen] if it were endowed with language (though "to endow with language" is more than "to make able to speak"). This proposition has a double meaning. It means, first, that she would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of man – not only, as is supposed, of the poet—are in nature). This proposition means, second, that she would lament. Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language. It contains scarcely more than the sensuous breath; and even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mours. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute. In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate. That which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable. To be named--even when the namer is godlike and blissful--perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning. But how much more melancholy it is to be named not from the one blessed paradisiacal language of names, but from the hundred languages of man, in which name has already withered, yet which, according to God's pronouncement, have knowledge of things. Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed. There is, in the relation of human languages to that of things, something that can be approximately described as

72 SW1, 72.
74 SW1, 72.
75 SW1, 72.
76 SW1, 72. The quotation marks not in the German original.
"overnaming"--the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all deliberate muteness. Overnaming as the linguistic being of melancholy points to another curious relation of language: the overprecision [Überbestimmtheit, perhaps better, “overdeterminedness”], that obtains in the tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers.\textsuperscript{77}

The logic of this passage is somewhat tortured. This is, perhaps, appropriate given what is being spoken of and who it is being spoken by – in a certain sense Benjamin is “endowing” nature with language and translating its mournful groans. It runs in many different directions – from the two non-corresponding senses given to nature’s lament to its “inversion” and intensification – nonetheless, its crescendo consists in nature’s lot as both mute and mournful. Nature no longer “soundlessly” reverberates with the name which God had given it, it is simply mute – insofar as there is a “voice” to be heard in nature’s silence, it is only that of lament: “even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always lament.” The language of man, which is meant for nature’s “redemption,” has fallen and served only to further wall up the linguistic being of nature, behind countless names.

It is only what Benjamin calls a “bourgeois concept of language” which will take this fallen and infinitely reproducing word as the true nature of language. Bourgeois society becomes, according to Irving Wohlfarth, “a hell that does not recognize itself as such. Not only is Paradise lost, so too is the very awareness of its loss. Fallen man has forgotten that he has forgotten.”\textsuperscript{78} The fall, the loss of blissful immediacy, will be a persistent source of interest for Benjamin as he develops his method of aesthetic criticism and his philosophy of history. The resolute refusal of illusion – the illusion that there was not a pre-historical loss of immediacy – will mark his work after 1916.

\textsuperscript{77} SW1, 72-73. The “overdetermination” which characterizes the language of ancient tragedy is one of the focuses of another fragment Benjamin also wrote during 1916, “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” in SW1, 56.

\textsuperscript{78} “Some Jewish Motifs,” 44.
In the 1928 book on the German “mourning play” Benjamin will discern a postlapsarian potential in melancholy. The poets of the German Baroque will retroactively challenge the bourgeois tendency to naturalize the vicissitudes of the fall – in economic inequality, for instance – and will instead refuse to lose sight of the fallenness of creation. The melancholic gaze stubbornly contemplates this fallenness: he, like Benjamin’s angel of history, “sees one single catastrophe which piles wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” All too aware that the task is not his to redeem the world, the melancholic at least recognizes the truth of the fall. There is little consolation, but at least there may be a form of “elegiac” happiness.

III. Antique and Modern Happiness

During the same year – 1916 – that Benjamin wrote the language essay, he composed a reflection on precisely the question of happiness (Glück). While Das Glück des Antiken Menschen bears traces of Benjamin’s early interest in the Youth Movement, it is possible, in light of the forgoing analysis, to read it as an extension of the critique of the “bourgeois conception of language” only in terms of a critique of its particular take on happiness. The emphasis of the “Happiness” piece falls upon a critique of “modern happiness,” which imagines the latter to rest in the small, “homunculus” pleasures of a naïve child – although ostensibly relieved of its naivety under the conditions of reflection. The antique concept of happiness, on the other hand, recognizes the fleetingness (even arbitrariness) of such a happy moments. Its context was ruled by the whims of the gods; and thus fateful. Antique man publically celebrates

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79 SW 4, 392.
80 It was one among a series of 6 fragments that would serve as an early foray into the relationship between Greek tragedy and the German Trauerspiel. On the context, see Howard Caygill, Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience (Routledge, 1998), 52.
81 See Appendix.
82 Ansgar Hillach notes that in this piece Benjamin was looking for a space “between youth culture and a new religiosity” to locate an “intensity of experience [Intensität der Erfahrung].” See Burkhardt Lindner, Benjamin-Handbuch (Metzler, 2006), 118.
happiness when it arrives – as a gift from the gods. Here happiness may be rarer in actuality, less manageable in its occurrences; but it was more intense in the moments when it did occur; its celebration was therefore, more *hymnic*.

What we have is an implicit critique of the bourgeois or liberal concept of happiness which does not disrupt the larger order (of the state) in which its extremities are mitigated, but rests content therein. Whereas modern happiness is that of Christian Europe/Protestant Germany; it is the pagan who best inherits the possibility of happiness – [it?] harbors fewer illusions about happiness, even if it sees the latter as directly related to the will of the gods. The relationship which Benjamin discerns between the ancient and the modern, however, is less than straightforward.

The happiness, or, perhaps more appropriately, especially in this ancient context, the *fortune* of ancient man could be discerned in paradigmatic form in the victory odes of the ancient Greek lyric poet, Pindar (ca. 522–443 BCE). As a lyric poet Pindar would compose and sing *hymns* of victory (*Siegeshymnen*) accompanied by a lyre (hence the designation *lyric*). These hymns would honor kings or, most often, competitors who had prevailed in the athletic competitions at Olympus and elsewhere. Invoking the tales of mythic heroes, his odes would praise the prowess of the individual athlete but, more importantly (and this is Benjamin’s emphasis) the benevolence of the god or the gods who had destined (*verhängen*) such a victory. Thus Benjamin says of the ancient man: “His happiness is nothing if not this – that the gods destined [*verhängen*] him to it, and it is his destiny [*Verhängnis*], when he chooses to believe that the gods gave it to *him* and precisely to *him*.“

Pindar puts it this way, in an ode for an athlete from a competition at Isthmea:

> For if a man, rejoicing in expense and toil, achieves godly excellence, and a divinity sows

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83 GS II:1, 128
the seed of lovely fame in him, then he already casts his anchor on the farthest shore of prosperity, since he is honored by the gods.\textsuperscript{84}

There are two particular characteristics of this older happiness by which Benjamin distinguishes it from modern happiness. The first, just referred to, is the understanding of its provenance: it is a \textit{gift} from the gods and not a \textit{property} of the one upon whom it is bestowed. The second characteristic, which follows from the first, concerns the means of its acceptance – which would, nonetheless, not consist in an appropriation. The victor does not hide his fortune behind modesty, but accepts it freely and \textit{publically}.

There the victor stands: visible to all, praised by the people; innocence plagues \textit{him} with bitter necessity, who holds the vessel of victory like a basin full of wine with raised hands, from which a spilled drop falling upon him stained him eternally. The merit which the gods gave to him, he has not to deny or obtain clandestinely, and no reflection on his innocence afflicts him – as it does the small, restless souls – but fulfillment of the blessings, so that the godly circle, once it has selected him, retains the stranger as a hero.\textsuperscript{85}

The image of the basin of wine raised in victory alludes to a section of the Pindaric ode just referred to. Here the victor of a chariot race in Isthmea is honored by being compared to the immodest – but not \textit{hubristic} – actions of Heracles who, “standing in a lion’s skin” and bearing a golden goblet of wine, “stretched his invincible hands up to heaven” in order to address his father, Zeus.\textsuperscript{86} To receive fortune as a gift (\textit{Geschenk}) – which is only minimally distinct from receiving it as fate (\textit{Schicksal}) – and to accept it without the bulwark of modesty, this is the

\textsuperscript{84} Pindar I.6
\textsuperscript{85} GS II:1, 129.
\textsuperscript{86} Pin I.6:

Standing in a lion’s skin, the strong warrior, son of Amphitryon, was asked to pour the first libation of nectar by incomparable Telamon, who lifted up to him the wine-bearing goblet bristling with gold. And Heracles stretched his invincible hands up to heaven and said, “Father Zeus, if you have ever heard my prayers with a willing heart, now, now with divine prayers I entreat you to grant this man a brave son from Eriboea, a son fated to be my guest-friend. May he have a body as invulnerable as this skin that is now wrapped around me, from the beast whom I killed that day in Nemea as the very first of my labors. And may he have spirit to match.”
meaning of the happiness of ancient man.

The happiness of modern man, by contrast, stands in double opposition to the ancient. It is seen, on the one hand, as something proper to himself: not so much a gift as simply given. For the post-mythical and disillusioned man of modernity, if there is still happiness, there are no longer gods to bestow it. On the other hand, in those rare moments when bourgeois man does encounter something akin to fortune – namely, in moments of extreme pain or anguish (Schmerz) which, in some manner, approximates an immediate contact with the forces of the Cosmos – he quickly and blushingly attempts to hide it; for he considers such encounters to be residues of naivety. By virtue of the capacity for critical reflection which characterizes post-enlightenment humanity, immediate encounters with nature cease to be meaningful. Should such an experience impose itself, the enlightened man is at a loss. “The thought suggests itself,” says Benjamin, that reflection paralyzes modern man with such intensity, that in such a simple and simple-minded happiness, which does not know the contrast to nature, the inner man appears to him all too unsubstantial and uninteresting, to be in the deepest free to express himself outwardly, to not remain in fact in a state of shame; concealed and constricted. 87

That is, with the unexpected emergence of immediacy, what we might call a mystical experience, in a sudden loss of critical and reflective distance, modern man is carried away into naivety, a situation he finds childish and embarrassing. Such moments of “happiness,” then, are not commemorated in hymnic jubilation, but are silenced and sequestered.

But, Benjamin notes, such coyness would be at best a false modesty, according to the standard of the ancient concept of happiness. “It is definitive for the image, which ancient man had of happiness, that every little modesty that buries happiness in the individual and wants to conceal it inaccessibly deep inside by means of reflection (as a Talisman against unhappiness [Unglück]), becomes its most frightening opposite, the sacrilege of the most insane pride:

87 GS II:1, 127.
hubris." To belittle this “highest hour, which makes men into heroes”; to diminish the magnitude (die Größe) of naïve innocence to the “homunculus, microscopic, diminutive-innocence” of modernity is anything but humility. It is to take what is not properly one’s own and treat it as such: to appropriate it. Appropriation would thus be the basic meaning of hubris.

But it is not the task of Benjamin’s reflection to raise the happiness of antiquity as the standard against which modernity would fail. The matter of happiness is instead considered dialectically: a relation between past and present will be established, but the form of the relation is neither a simple return to a golden age nor a definitive progress beyond it – and certainly not a sublation of the ancient by the modern.

The distinction here between ancient and modern maps on to a corresponding one which is also at work in this text, but it is drawn from Friedrich Schiller. In a 1795-96 essay entitled, On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry, Schiller develops this distinction between the naïve and the sentimental in some detail. Roughly speaking, the naïve belongs to the pre-reflective experience of antiquity and the sentimental to the modern. Neither designation, however, is intended as strictly pejorative. In fact, in either case the poetic task remains the same: to articulate the unity of thought and experience. An ancient or naïve poet, like Homer (but Schiller also considers Goethe to be a naïve poet, thus troubling the strictly chronological distinction), sought this unity by imitating the real world in poetry, not yet alienated from nature by intellectual reflection, already laden with moments of mythical contact between human and divine. The sentimental poet likewise seeks to represent a unity of thought and experience, but non-mimetically; for the mediation of thought interrupts any such continuity. What the poet takes as his task is now the representation of an ideal of reconciliation.89

88 GS II:1, 128.
89 “The fact that Schiller’s terms have both historical and characterological (or psychological) meanings
But when you are consoled at the lost happiness of nature then let her perfection be your heart’s example. If you march out toward her from you artificial environment she will stand before you in her great calm, in her naïve beauty, in her childlike innocence and simplicity – then linger at this image, cultivate this emotion; this is worth of your sublimest humanity. Let it no longer occur to you to want to exchange with her, but take her up within yourself and strive to wed her eternal advantage with your eternal prerogative, and from both produce the divine.  

As Schiller makes clear in this passage, the poetic task does not consist in a retrieval of naivety, but in the post-critical rescue of the experience in the idealization of happiness. 

The opposition which Benjamin sets up between ancient and modern happiness, especially when it is read in light of Schiller’s distinction between the naïve and the sentimental, is not a simple valorization of the ancients. The fact of modernity – if modernity can be understood as a kind of ambivalent confrontation with myth and not the inevitable progress of history – is not to be spurned, but reckoned with. This telling is thus not reducible to a neo-classicist or even romantic desire for the harmony of antiquity. It is an unfinished dialectic of the antique and the modern. That is, one which holds out the hope of a new constellation and anew image of happiness, even if it cannot be guaranteed. In this way it is also to be distinguished from Schiller’s idealization of happiness. Unlike Schiller’s, Benjamin’s dialectic does not terminate in a final reconciliation. 

The basic error of modernity is not its submission to the demands of reason – Benjamin is no irrationalist. Instead, it is its refusal to account for the experience of happiness as anything other than a “small” guilty pleasure. While the experience of happiness is staged by the ancients with a degree of boldness and ostentation equal to that experience, the modern man smothers

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causes…problems: poets of a ‘naïve’ disposition can be encountered in modern times (Shakespeare and Goethe), just as ‘sentimentally’ inclined poets are to be found even in antiquity (Euripides and Horace). And when Schiller says that ‘every true genius must be naïve, or it is not genius,’ it is plain that the historical dimension is completely lacking.” Nisbet, H. B., “Introduction” to German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller and Goethe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 23.

such moments under a diminutive conception of experience. And, “for this reason,” Benjamin
claims, “the modern sensation [Empfindung] of happiness possesses the petty and the secretive
[das Kleinlich und Heimlich] simultaneously, and it has given birth to the conception of the
happy soul, who disavows its happiness before itself in constant activity and artificial
constriction of feeling.”\footnote{GS II:1, 127. In 1918 Benjamin will lay out what he calls a “Program of the Coming Philosophy,” which will attempt rid itself of this diminutive and enfeebling vision of happiness, based as it is on a overly circumscribed concept of experience. He will describe a properly modern program which will take the indisputable gains of the Kantian system and supplement them with what he considers to be a more robust account of experience. That is, it will take for granted Kant’s “confidence that the knowledge of which we can give the clearest account will also be the most profound,”(SW1, 100) even while it will resist what Benjamin sees to be Kant’s impoverished concept of experience. In limiting itself to a concept of experience limited to an Enlightenment Weltanschaung, Benjamin claimed, Kant “undertook his work on the basis of an experience virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance.” (SW1, 101) It should be possible, Benjamin believes, to extend this system to include the possibility of mystical experiences – experiences of bliss which somehow circumvent the reflective capacities of the intellect yet somehow remain accountable to reason. What the fragment thus leaves as a task for thought is the following: Must the achievement of critical intellectual distance result in the diminution of happiness? As we shall see, it is precisely the mythical origin and the public display of happiness which are its most important characteristics. In 1916, however, Benjamin will limit his analysis to a comparison between two experiences of happiness.}\ The intensity of happiness, if it is to serve as the basis for a theory of historical action, if it is to exist in a relationship with redemption – even as its weak analogue – it cannot be diminished under the demands of bourgeois propriety.

IV. Conclusion

It is not a consistent concept of happiness which is shared between these two texts. More importantly, it is a certain memory of happiness which holds them in common. In the former, it is the pre-historical bliss of Paradise; in the latter, the concern is with an antique, and admittedly naïve, hymnic happiness. In either case it was a certain modern or “bourgeois” conception which is the object of critique. While it is not Benjamin’s intention to recreate the bliss of Eden or to restore the Odes of Pindar to the highest dignity, it is his task to remind us that such happiness stands in the background of the present – and that the loss of this happiness is what is essential. The various crises of modernity – economic, political, religious – are best understood in the
metaphysical light, or shadow, of the fall. This loss is both irreparable and indispensable. In order to refuse the bourgeois illusion which would naturalize the conditions of Babel and enshrine a negotiable and mitigated happiness, the memory of bliss cannot be lost sight of.\textsuperscript{92} “The fading memory of paradise would constitute the one point of reference which makes it possible to measure the increasing velocity of the Fall.”\textsuperscript{93} To even consider the question of redemption, it would first be necessary to face honestly and unflinchingly the conditions from which redemption is sought. The lament of nature would ring clearer than any premature attempt to raise a hymn of victory.

\textsuperscript{92} Note the political significance – The refusal of the illusion of both political theocracy and liberal “secular” politics: the former imagines the fall to be too easily overcome, in the mode of a \textit{deus ex machina}; the latter imagines the fall as non-existent.

\textsuperscript{93} Wohlfarth, “Jewish Motifs,” 42.
Chapter 3: Tragic Happiness

...and but for the briefest space doth he fare free of woe.
- Sophocles, Antigone

I. Introduction

The third play of Aeschylus’ Oresteia trilogy, The Eumenides, concludes with a trial. The proceedings are convened in order to determine whether or not Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, the grandson of Atreus, is guilty. Orestes had avenged his father’s death by killing his murderer, who was Orestes’ own mother, Clytemnestra. Through much of the play Orestes is pursued by the Erinyes or the Furies: a host of terrifying chthonic deities who have been roused by the enraged ghost of Clytemnestra. As representatives of fate, their resolve was insatiable and their task singular: to exact vengeance upon Orestes for the condemnable crime of matricide. The Furies pursue Orestes until he arrives at the temple of Athena, where he pleads his case before the goddess. She orders a trial which ultimately calls to a halt what would have been but one more turn in a spiraling cycle of familial violence, one more moment in what had become a history unto itself: an endless cycle of guilt and retribution.

For Orestes the blood of his mother did not so much cry out from the ground for justice, as it birthed from this pagan soil the very instrument of retribution. Here, Orestes was not only being held to account for the murder he had committed with his own hands, but he was being implicated in a continuum of guilt and punishment that had long preceded him – it was the infamous curse upon the house of Atreus which served as the mythological background for
Aeschylus’ trilogy. The question of whether or not this continuum would *succeed* Orestes is precisely the question the final play attempts to answer with the institution of legal justice. 

In this mythical context it is guilt which determines the relationship of the present generation to those of the past; and *fate* is the form that relationship takes. If fate places the present into a certain proximity with the past (making it perpetually responsible for its guilt), it is pernicious; but so would any resolution (historicist or otherwise) which would attempt to immunize the present from an ethical responsibility for the past. In what sense can it be said, as Benjamin does, that the dead continue to exercise a claim over the living? Is there another way of thinking this relationship that is not determined by guilt and imposed by fate? 

The answer to this question is bound up with the idea of happiness. For happiness is related to redemption by way of a messianic demand, *weak* thought it may be. This chapter will explore the weak messianic potential of happiness in one particular context: the Greek world of paganism. In this regard, the central question will be that of the status of fate and the immanent break that is inaugurated with the latter in Greek tragedy. Benjamin will go on to elaborate an insight already put forward by Hermann Cohen; namely that “[i]n tragedy myth dies away.”

### II. Fate and Happiness

Happiness performs a particular function in the pagan context. While the “Happiness of Antique Man” spelled out one of these possibilities, another emerges in relation to guilt as a category of fate. Benjamin’s concept of fate, and its connection to happiness, can thus be discerned in his critique of guilt. This critique is indebted, in part, to the moral philosophy of the Marburg Neo-Kantian and Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen. Benjamin’s reservations about

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Cohen and his project notwithstanding, there is a sense in which, as Werner Hamacher notes, the latter consistently “provides the...orientation for the relevant issues in Benjamin.” This is certainly the case for thinking about fate – and happiness.

There are two aspects of Cohen’s critique of guilt which are pertinent for Benjamin. First of all, guilt in its original mythical context is an arbitrary and not a moral concept. For pagan antiquity, Cohen says, “man does not yet distinguish between good and bad, but his might is his right. As models he has his gods, who likewise act only in accordance with their moods.” In this case, guilt is something imposed according to the irregular whims of the gods, a manifestation of divine power which results in human suffering; an occurrence which can only retroactively be seen as human culpability. But to the randomness of its dispensation, corresponds a diligence in accounting: guilt is remembered in perpetuity.

Thus, the second relevant aspect of Cohen’s critique of guilt is its inescapability or fatefulness. “[M]ythical consciousness,” says Cohen, “makes the criminal the grandchild of his ancestors, and to this there is only one reply: woe unto you that you are a grandchild.” Benjamin takes up precisely this idea when he says of fate that it is “the guilt context of the living.” This is the nexus within which the criminal is always already implicated.

But the fact that guilt has a divine origin, in this sense, does not make of it a properly “religious” concept. For Cohen, as for Benjamin, monotheism achieves a decisive moral victory over paganism. But, whereas Cohen elaborates and celebrates the full sweep of this victory narrative, Benjamin is primarily interested in the initially disruptive moment: the rupture

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2 Some of these differences will become apparent as the chapter proceeds. The perhaps most obvious difference will be the way that Benjamin undertakes a thoroughgoing critique of law: not only as an insufficient remedy for fate, but its very continuation.
3 Hamacher, 84.
4 Cohen, Religion, 169.
5 Cohen, Religion, 169.
6 SW1, 204.
immanent to the pagan context. This rupture is occasioned by happiness. The close connection between guilt and the deities in Greek mythology should not, Benjamin believes, lead us to the conclusion that it is, therefore, a *religious* concept; in which case, “fate-imposed misfortune [*Unglück*] is seen as the response of God or the gods to a religious offence.”

The imposition of misfortune or unhappiness (*Unglück*) is not commensurate in this case with the imputation of guilt (*Schuld*) in the authentically religious sense. The distinction between misfortune and guilt is fundamental to the distinction between the mythological and the religious. The kind of guilt imposed by the arbitrary will of the gods, as opposed to, for instance, the guilt incurred from the transgression of a literal law, lacked the corresponding ethical category of innocence. Fate-imposed guilt was thus not ethical but arbitrary. What was left to the unfortunate individual, therefore, was neither hope of exculpation, nor even the consolation of the possibility of having chosen otherwise. But, if an *innocent* path was excluded a priori from the ancient pagan, there was, nevertheless, the possibility of *happy* one.

The possibility did not exist, for the ancient pagan, of absolution from the guilt of fate-imposed suffering. But happiness served in its own way as an *escape* from fate. The claim of the 1916 “Happiness” fragment, that happiness itself is a gift from the gods, is not disputed, but it is placed in a different, more subversive light in a piece from 1919 called “Fate and Character.”

Here Benjamin asks rhetorically about the origins of happiness: “Is happiness [*Glück*], as misfortune [*Unglück*] doubtless is, an intrinsic category of fate?” If there was a seeming contiguity between fate and happiness in the 1916 fragment, here the answer is a clear no. “Happiness is, rather, what releases the fortunate [*Glück*] man from the embroilment of the Fates and from the net of his own fate. Not for nothing,” he continues,

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7 SW1, 202.
8 SW1, 201-206.
9 SW1, 203.
does Hölderlin call the blissful [seligen] gods “fateless.” Happiness and bliss are therefore no more part of the sphere of fate than is innocence. But an order whose sole intrinsic concepts are misfortune and guilt, and with which there is no conceivable path of liberation (for insofar as something is fate, it is misfortune and guilt) – such an order cannot be religious, no matter how the misunderstood concept of guilt appears to suggest the contrary.11

Fate cannot be assigned to the sphere of religion, as Benjamin is using the term. Religion, specifically the monotheism which Cohen has highlighted, deals in forgiveness. The guilt imposed by fate is inescapable, such that even the “atonement” which the Furies demand of Orestes – i.e. his blood for his mother’s – serves merely as a temporary appeasement of the wrath of Clytemnestra’s ghost. Indeed, atonement, in this sense, far from unseating the primacy of guilt, allows it to continue to extend its temporal reach – “to the third and fourth generation.” For monotheism, on the other hand, Cohen says, “[f]rom every guilt there is a turning away.”12 “Monotheism,” he says, “fundamentally severs forgiveness … from the wholly mythological, original form of atonement.”13 Where atonement strengthens the relation between man and guilt – by reconciling him with it – forgiveness, in the monotheistic sense, would sever the link altogether. But this is not what Benjamin is arguing in “Fate and Character.” Recourse to Cohen merely shows, in more detail, why guilt qua fate is not a religious concept. Indeed, Benjamin is explicit, the break with fate he is interested in is accomplished “not by having the endless pagan chain of guilt and atonement superseded by the purity of the man who has expiated his sins, who is reconciled with the pure god.”14 While it is disarticulation of the relationship between man and fate that he is interested in, happiness accomplishes this break in a different, more immanent,

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10 The reference here is to Holderlin’s poem “Hyperion’s Song of Fate” The second stanza begins as follows: “Fateless [Schiksaallosse] the Heavenly breathe like an unweaned infant asleep,” which stands in contrast to the beginning of the third stanza, which speaks of humanity: “But we are fated [gegeben] to find no foothold, no rest.” Selected poems and fragments, trans. Michael Hamburger, (New York: Penguin, 1998), 27.
11 SW1, 202.
12 Cohen, Religion, 193.
13 Cohen, Religion, 214.
14 SW1, 203.
way. This way is signaled already in the reference to Hölderlin’s “blissful” gods. Indeed, just as little as fate knows innocence, does it know happiness. Happiness, if it does not annihilate, at least neutralizes fate. But before this neutralization can be elaborated, more needs to be said about fate, its domain and its effects.

**Fate, Law, and Time**

Which discourse, Benjamin wonders, is saturated with guilt and suffering to such an extent that innocence and happiness are excluded? Perhaps unexpectedly, he concludes that it is the domain of law or right (Recht) which meets these criteria. Law would thus lack access to innocence and happiness. How is unhappiness to be considered a legal category and not merely a contingent effect of its enforcement? The logic will become clearer as the argument develops, but at this point Benjamin simply intensifies the claim: “it is demonstrable,” he says, “that all legal guilt is nothing other than misfortune [Unglück].”\(^{15}\)

Benjamin’s indictment against law is unexpected not because it is itself capricious, but because it reverses the conventional wisdom: that it is precisely law that lifts humanity from the brutal logic of vengeance and retribution into the sphere of ethical relations – and thus, to justice. (Such an assumption is derived not just from a cultural narrative of progress, but, also from a reading of Aeschylean tragedy. We shall return to this.) But it is precisely justice which law cannot approach, according to Benjamin.

Mistakenly, through confusing itself with the realm of justice [Gerechtigkeit], the order of law – which is merely the residue of the demonic stage of human existence, when legal statutes determined not only men’s relationships but also their relation to the gods – has preserved itself long past the time of the victory over the demons.\(^{16}\)

\(^{15}\) SW1, 203. It may be worth noting that this rather unqualified indictment against law should not be confused with a full scale antinomianism that would extend, for instance, into the domain of religious law. For religion has served in the argument as the measure against which law fails. Religion, that is, retains a proximity to innocence – that is, to redemption. See SW1, 204.

\(^{16}\) SW1, 203.
Law represents no victory over fate, but the very medium of its continued power. Law, on this account, would be the retroactive determination of unhappiness as guilt. In a different, but not unrelated, context Benjamin refers to the ancient Greek myth of Niobe as an example of a transformation of unhappiness into culpability. The myth comes to us from various sources, but the fact that the legend was given dramatic form by both Aeschylus and Sophocles is significant (even if the Sophoclean version is lost and the Aeschylean is extant only in fragmentary form). According to the legend, Niobe, the daughter of Tantalus, had many children – seven sons and seven daughters – this, she thought, gave her reason to boast and to question the superiority of the gods; especially the goddess Leto, who had only two children – Apollo and Artemis – twins fathered by Zeus. Leto is angered by the hubris of Niobe and thus has her children kill all fourteen of Niobe’s children – Artemis, the daughters and Apollo, the sons. In the wake of the slaughter Niobe’s husband, Amphion, takes his own life. Niobe, obviously devastated, weeps uncontrollably. And, in a final twist, she is turned into a stone – a rock from which tears continued to flow.

It would seem, claims Benjamin, that “the action of Apollo and Artemis is only a punishment [Strafe],” but in fact, “their violence establishes a law far more than it punishes the infringement of a law that already exists.” Thus, Niobe's arrogance calls down destiny [Verhängnis] upon her not because her arrogance offends against the law but because it challenges fate [Schicksal] – to a fight in which fate

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17 This confusion of guilt with misfortune in the legal context is summarized well by Judith Butler.

To suffer from fate is precisely not to be the cause of one’s own suffering, it is to suffer outside the context of guilt, as a consequence of accident or powers beyond one’s control. When fate succeeds however, in creating positive law, a significant transmutation of this meaning of fate ensues. The law wrought by fate succeeds in making the subject believe that he or she is responsible for her own suffering in life: in other words her suffering is the causal consequence of her actions. Fate inflicts a suffering that is then, through law, attributed to the subject as his or her own responsibility. Hent de Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan, eds., Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World (Fordham Univ Press, 2006), 215.

18 Furthermore, Holderlin’s translation of Sophocles makes reference to the myth.
must triumph and can bring to light a law only in its triumph.\textsuperscript{19}

It is not guilt that occasions punishment, but punishment that occasions guilt. Law, in this respect is an afterthought, a retroactive justification.

Violence...bursts upon Niobe from the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate... Although it brings a cruel death to Niobe's children, it stops short of claiming the life of their mother, whom it leaves behind, more guilty than before through the death of the children, both as an eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods.\textsuperscript{20}

The tale of Niobe represents, for Benjamin, not a moral warning against \textit{hubris}, but a testament to the origin of law as “violence crowned by fate.” Further, it places law and violence – and with it, unhappiness – into a primordial co-implication. It only became possible to mark Niobe’s brashness as a transgression by virtue of a secondary process of interpretation or a juridical veneer. In this case, Niobe becomes not only the object of Leto’s wrath, but also the monument which commemorates the founding of a new law: the very stone upon which a commandment is inscribed.\textsuperscript{21} This is why Benjamin claims that she becomes both “an eternally mute bearer of guilt” and “a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods.”

While it is assumed – and in authentically moral situations, such as Benjamin implies are present the “religious” sphere, it would be true – that law precedes any act of transgression (and thus guilt) from which follows punishment. In this case, however, the order is different. What takes place first is an unqualified or singular human act, followed by the divine manifestation of anger and finally, the institution of a law – which retroactively accounts for the act as illicit. As the argument goes, the procedures of law are simply incapable of catching up with what Benjamin calls the “active man.” “No definition of the external world can disregard the limits set

\textsuperscript{19}“Critique of Violence” SW1, 248. Translation modified.
\textsuperscript{20} SW1, 248.
\textsuperscript{21} Commandment (\textit{Gebot}) would be the wrong word here. For Benjamin draws a conceptual distinction between \textit{Recht} and \textit{Gebot} in “Critique of Violence.”
by the concept of the active man. Between the active man and the external world, all is interaction.”

This, however, is precisely what law attempts to do: to subordinate man to fate by reducing him to a mute bearer of guilt. Morality concerns “only actions and never qualities,” says Benjamin. But law deals in qualities. Law thus constructs a kind of web which might trap the active man, at least in part, reducing him to an identifiable quality, to some particular aspect of what would be called his “character” – hubristic, vain, etc. Here we approach Benjamin’s definition of fate.

Law condemns not to punishment [\textit{Strafe}] but to guilt. Fate is the guilt context [\textit{Schuldzusammenhang}] of the living.24

Law is the means by which pagan man – and not just pagan man – is consigned to the sphere of fate – to guilt. This guilt, furthermore, is “held together” in a context or a web which extends itself from one moment to the next, one generation to the next in a continuous cycle.

It corresponds to the natural condition of the living – that semblance [\textit{Schein}], not yet wholly dispelled, from which man is so far removed that, under its rule, he was never wholly immersed in it but only visible in his best part. It is not therefore really man who has a fate; rather, the subject of fate is indeterminable.25

Fate, then adheres to man as intimately as does his natural life. What then can it mean that this man is “never wholly immersed” in fate and that “the subject of fate” remains “indeterminable?” Benjamin’s philosophical anthropology would seem to consist in a distinction between, and a certain separability of, the singular active individual and the mere fact of his living. Elsewhere, Benjamin draws this distinction in terms of “the living” on the one hand, and “mere life,” on the other.26 While Giorgio Agamben has made much of this distinction and its bio-political stakes,27

22 SW1, 202. The Kantian resonances are noticeable here: the freedom that characterizes authentically moral action is something regulated by the Moral Law, but inaccessible to external or juridical legality.
23 SW1, 205.
24 SW1, 204.
25 SW1, 204.
26 As it is in “Critique of Violence,” SW1, 250.
27 Giorgio Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life}, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford
it seems that Werner Hamacher provides a more important interpretive key in this case by referring us back to Cohen, specifically his 1904 *Ethics of Pure Will*. Myth, according to Cohen, “still sees no difference between the individual and his people.” What Benjamin derives from Cohen’s analysis of myth is that fate works in abstraction. It cannot target the singularity of what Benjamin calls “the active man” but instead works upon a much more generic object: humanity in general or that “mere life” which is common to all. Here the analogy between fate and law becomes a little clearer: for law, by definition, deals in generality. In order then for fate – and law – to fully implicate the subject, he must, in Benjamin’s words, understand himself as identical with the mere life that is in him – and as nothing in excess of it. Benjamin refers to the example of a fortune teller:

In the manner of fate, this life can be coupled to cards as to planets, and the clairvoyante makes use of the simple technique of placing it in the context of guilt by means of the first calculable, definite thing that comes to hand (things unchastely pregnant with certainty). Thereby she discovers in signs something about natural life in man …; as, on his side, the man who visits her gives way to the guilty life within himself.

Fate finds its object in man, therefore, only to the extent that he subjects himself to it, insofar as he gives way to the guilty life within him.

The imprudence of the fortuneteller, which the guilty man misunderstands as authority, would also characterize the juridical situation. Benjamin says of that judge that he can perceive fate wherever he pleases; with every judgment he must blindly dictate fate. It is never man but only the life in him that it strikes – the part involved in natural guilt and misfortune [*Unglück*] by virtue of semblance.

Law would thus be as equally incapable of accounting for the singular human subject as the clairvoyant. Both are operations which serve merely to ensnare the subject in a calculable web of

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29 SW1. 204.
30 SW1. 204.
qualities. That is, they target what is perceived to be his *character*. This is an illusion, a “semblance,” to be sure but it is one to which not just the man of antiquity, but the man of modernity constantly gives way. He does so not just by submitting to the rule of law in various aspects of life, but by submitting to the *temporal* continuum it establishes. A task fundamental to understanding fate will then be to understand the “nature of *time* in fate.”

To this end, Benjamin claims that the “guilt context” which fate establishes is temporal. But Benjamin will add an important qualification here; namely, that it “is temporal in a totally inauthentic way, very different in its kind and measure from the time of redemption...”

There is no room in this temporal scheme for the “active man,” but only for the *guilty* one – which is to say, the one determined by his *qualities*, rather than his *action*. This temporality, therefore, lacks any moral significance. A temporality which would allow for authentically moral action would be a *present* which is neither indebted to a guilty past nor destined toward a certain future. The porous temporal moment in which the unhappy man sits before the clairvoyante would persist in an ambiguous present.

The fortuneteller who uses cards and the seer who reads palms teach us at least that this time can at every moment be made simultaneous with another (not present). It is not an autonomous time, but is parasitically dependent on the time of a higher, less natural life. It has no present, for fateful moments exist only in bad novels, and it knows past and future only in curious variations.

This temporality would be a parody of what Benjamin will eventually call a messianic time: a time in which past, present, and future interpenetrate in an *authentic* sense. Thus, he says in his 1940 “Theses on the Concept of History” that “only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.”

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31 SW1, 204, my italics.
32 “…or of music, or of truth.”
33 SW1, 204.
34 SW4, 390.
criminal, like Orestes, is always already implicated. Fate would seem to have the benefit of constructing temporality such that the present is not immunized from the past, much the way Benjamin will speak, in the second of his theses, of the “weak messianic task” with which the present has been endowed. The problem, however, is that the way that this relation is construed. In fate this relation is determined by guilt – it makes every man the grandchild of his ancestors. Thus, in an early fragment Benjamin claims that “Guilt is the highest category of world history for guaranteeing the uni-directionality (Einsinnigkeit) of what occurs.”35 And similarly, in some of his latest notes we read the following: “The basic conception of myth is the world as punishment – punishment which actually engenders those to whom punishment is due.”36 The basic problem with fate, therefore, is the temporal continuum it constructs, a continuum which predetermines, even engenders human life as always already guilty, always already deserving of punishment, and ultimately incapable of any historical action which might be undertaken freely, which might “make the continuum of history explode.”

The weak messianic power with which the present has been endowed, by contrast, consists in historiographically reformulating the relationship of the past to the present. This relation is determined not by guilt, but, by the (weakly messianic) powers of remembrance (Eingedenken)37 and of happiness. For, “happiness is...what releases the fortunate man from the embroilment of the Fates and from the net of his own fate.”38

**Tragedy and Fate**

This more or less concludes the argument about the domain of fate’s effectiveness. But the question remains: how is fate to be confronted, if this is possible? If law represents no victory

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36 SW 4, 403.
37 SW 4, 305; GS 1, 701.
38 SW1, 203.
over barbarism, but merely its sublimation, then where is a route of escape to be found? “[N]ot in law” claims Benjamin, “but in tragedy.” It is here “that the head of genius lifted itself for the first time from the mist of guilt, for in tragedy demonic fate is breached.” The demonic stands as an image of ambiguity: an uncertain division between human and divine, legal and illegal such that one is always caught up in a Kafkaesque scenario of not knowing where one stands with respect to law or fate. But what is most significant about tragedy for Benjamin is that it is here that “pagan man becomes aware that he is better than his god.” As we shall see, the basic truth of Attic tragedy for Benjamin consists in the transformation of older hero legends under the tendentiousness of the tragedians. Thus, while the brutality of law is displayed with a particular clarity in the myth of Niobe, it will be in the tragic reconstruction of myth that an escape is found. Under such reconstructions, the heroic character takes particular form. While he will recognize his superiority to the gods,

the realization robs him of speech, remains unspoken, without declaring itself, it seeks secretly to gather its forces. Guilt and atonement [Sühne] it does not measure justly in the balance, but mixes indiscriminately. There is no question of the “moral world order” being restored; instead, the moral hero, still dumb, not yet of age – as such he is called a hero – wishes to raise himself by shaking the tormented world. The paradox of the birth of genius in moral speechlessness, moral infantality, is the sublimity of tragedy. It is probably the basis of all sublimity, in which genius, rather than God, appears

This situation, in which genius rather than God appears, in the peculiar case of speechlessness, will come to be the epochal contribution of Attic tragedy. The hero’s silence, furthermore,

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39 It also represents another appearance of an implicit narrative of progress which Benjamin never completely disavows, even if it is constantly problematized. Benjamin’s debt to the anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887) has been noticed (See, Joseph Mali, The Reconciliation of Myth: Benjamin's Homage to Bachofen Journal of the History of Ideas 60.1 (1999) 165-187. See also Benjamin’s own “Review of Bernoulli’s Bachofen” in SW1, 426-427; “Johann Jakob Bachofen” in SW3, 11-24). It is possible that Benjamin is referring to Bachofen’s idea of a pre-ethical – matriarchal – period of human civilization. Bachofen himself identifies a transitional moment from the matriarchal to the patriarchal in the Greek tragedians, especially in Aeschylus’ Eumenides. See Bachofen, Myth, religion, and mother right: selected writings of J.J. Bachofen, trans. Ralph Manheim, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 158. This will be important in my later analysis of Aeschylus’ trilogy for Benjamin’s project.

40 SW1, 203.

41 SW1, 203- 204; quoted in OGT, 109.
represents not a hindrance to, but the very path of victory. Before exploring the specifics of Benjamin’s analysis of tragedy, especially in his Habilitation thesis on the German “Mourning Play” or Trauerspiel, it will be necessary to provide some broader context.

III. “Germans and Other Greeks”

Benjamin was not the first to make the connection between happiness and tragedy. We might also consider the subversive “cheerfulness” (Heiterkeit) that Nietzsche discerns in the unfortunate (or unhappy, unglückselige) Oedipus of Sophocles in his 1872 Birth of Tragedy. According to Nietzsche, it would be a mistake to understand the seemingly unwarranted optimism that displays itself in Attic tragedy, and especially the Oedipus cycle of Sophocles, as an “unendangered comfort.” Such “‘Greek cheerfulness’” (Nietzsche’s scare quotes) would be merely the “Apollonian” element having its moment. But this was by no means an abolition or a sublation of the carnivalesque riotousness of the “Dionysian” – the two elements according to Nietzsche’s primary thesis, existed in Greek tragedy in an indispensible co-implication. The unfortunate yet noble Oedipus of Oedipus Rex experiences suffering or misfortune despite his wisdom; because of his wisdom. He was fated to do “monstrous things”:

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\text{it was my fate to defile my mother's bed,} \\
\text{to bring forth to men a human family that people could not bear to look upon,} \\
\text{to murder the father who engendered me}
\]

By virtue of these, in no sense free, acts he was thus destined to suffering and eventual death. But through this very suffering – and a certain “cheerfulness” which manifested itself as an obstinate search for the truth; even as it became clear where his search would lead – Oedipus

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43 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy And The Case of Wagner, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1967), 67 (§ 9)
spreads a magical power of blessing [eine magische segensreiche Kraft] that remains effective even beyond his decease. The noble human being does not sin, the profound poet wants to tell us: though every law, every natural order, even the moral world may perish through his actions, his actions also produce a higher magical circle of effects which found a new world on the ruins of the old one that has been overthrown.\textsuperscript{44}

The cheerfulness of Oedipus was that of (staying with Nietzsche’s image) a judge who faced the “knot” of a trial: as the knot was undone – as Oedipus unraveled the secrets of his past – so was the hero himself undone. The tenacious pursuit of Oedipus – at one and the same time the pursuit of wisdom and of downfall (“tragic knowledge”) – introduced, Nietzsche says, a “superior cheerfulness into the whole work.”\textsuperscript{45} In \textit{Oedipus at Colonus}, we learn of the later life of Oedipus: now banished (by his own resolve) and blind (by his own hand). What we encounter, says Nietzsche, is a recurrence of this cheerfulness, but this time “elevated into an infinite transfiguration.” Where the vigorous dialectical pursuits of the young king corresponded to his utter passivity in the face of fate in Thebes, now the elderly exile struck by an excess of misery, abandoned solely to suffer whatever befalls him, is confronted by the superterrestrial cheerfulness that descends from the divine sphere and suggests to us that the hero attains the highest activity, extending far beyond his life, through his purely passive posture, while his conscious deeds and desires, earlier in his life, merely led him into passivity.\textsuperscript{46}

If Greek tragedy is always an intermingling of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, then does this interpretation exhaust the sense of the myth? Nietzsche thinks not: even if it exhausts the poet’s own staging of the myth, there is something in excess of this intention. The myth itself secretes a certain (unnatural) truth.

[T]he poet’s whole conception is nothing but precisely that bright image which healing nature projects before us after a glance into the abyss. Oedipus, the murderer of his father, the husband of his mother, the solver of the riddle of the Sphinx! What does the mysterious triad of these fateful deeds tell us?\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Birth}, 67-68.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Birth}, 68.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Birth}, 68.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Birth}, 68.
The Dionysian element inevitably breaks forth, through the “beautiful illusion” of the Apollonian image: the dramatic form cannot indefinitely maintain the semblance of a stable order. “The myth” – not Sophocles – “seems to wish to whisper to us” a truth hidden within this tale of tragic knowledge. It is not an accident that the actions of Oedipus which would eventually lead to his own end were, not just illegal, but profound abominations: crimes against nature. Nietzsche perceives, not just an excess of transgression, but a certain necessity to these crimes against nature: “How else,” Nietzsche wonders, “could one compel nature to surrender her secrets if not by triumphantly resisting her…?” Thus, “the same man who solves the riddle of nature – that Sphinx of two species – also must break the most sacred natural orders by murdering his father and marrying his mother.”

There is a price to be paid, however, for these abominations. Even if the order of the cosmos has been challenged by the hero’s actions, even if he has cheated fate, by undermining the conditions under which it operates, he must go down with the ship. Thus, “he who by means of his knowledge plunges nature into the abyss of destruction must also suffer the dissolution of nature in his own person.”

For Nietzsche, then, by way of Attic tragedy, cheerfulness becomes linked not to “unendangered comfort,” but to a destruction of old order of law, morality, even nature. And this destruction – the production of catastrophe, we might say – is also the founding of a new order of existence; one that is built “on the ruins of the old one that has been overthrown.” The resonances here with the messianic redemption – the co-implication of catastrophe and utopia – are significant, especially in the context of Greek tragedy. Benjamin saw in the Attic poets and the seemingly antinomian potential of the tragic hero a certain messianic light (albeit a decidedly profane one), even if, as we shall see, he will register a critical distance from Nietzsche. Along

48 Birth, 69.
49 Birth, 69.
with the notion that tragedy consisted in the dramatic reformulation of ancient myths, there are two other features of Nietzsche’s interpretation that will play an important role in Benjamin’s own reading of tragedy. The first is the posthumous effectiveness of the tragic hero’s actions: the “blessing” which remains effective “even beyond his decease.” This grants to the hero a certain kind of *immortality*. Secondly, the type of sphere this blessing carves out is one of new possibilities which are not limited by the structures of the old order; even if the old is not obliterated altogether. The new is built upon the *ruins* of the old – *de facto* and *de jure*. Tragedy, for Benjamin and for Nietzsche, serves to mark an epochal rupture.

In taking recourse to Greek tragedy as a prism through which contemporary life could be refracted, Benjamin was following in a long tradition; and a specifically *German* tradition, according to Peter Szondi. 50 It was a tradition which took early form in the Greeks themselves – in Aristotle’s *Poetics* most notably. But it was taken up in earnest, in modern German philosophy. Szondi’s insightful essay on the tragic puts forward the argument that there is a difference between an approach like Aristotle’s and that of the Idealists. “Since Aristotle,” he argues in the opening lines of the essay, “there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic.” 51 This is not to claim – even if it poses the possibility – that a poetics of tragedy is obsolete, only that the modern German reading of tragedy has concerned itself much more with the *idea of the tragic*, than with the particular elements of tragic drama. Szondi locates the latter endeavor in the attempt to continue to produce tragic drama in “the

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50 “If one counts Kierkegaard among the German philosophers and leaves aside his students such as Unamuno, the philosophy of the tragic is proper to German philosophy. Until this day [his essay was written in 1961], the concept of the tragic has remained fundamentally a German one,” *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 1-2.

Spanish, English, and German Baroque, as well as [in] French and German Classicism."\(^{52}\) He continues,

To understand the historical relation prevailing between nineteenth-century theory and the seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century practice, one must assume that the flight of Minerva’s owl over this landscape also begins only with the onset of dusk.\(^{53}\)

To pose this as a question, one could ask: has the philosophy of the tragic – which Szondi will understand to consist in the identity of the tragic and the dialectical – supplanted tragedy in terms of its truth? This is not precisely Benjamin’s concern. While he will make the claim about the impossibility of tragedy after its antique form, his approach differs markedly from both Nietzsche and the Idealists.\(^{54}\)

The approaches between which Benjamin situates his philosophical appropriation of tragedy are Hegel and Nietzsche. For Benjamin, the difference between these two thinkers is commensurate to the difference between a naively moralized and a hastily aestheticized theory of the tragic. This will have to be spelled out in more detail, but it can be noted that if the former betrays a naivety about the relation between history and morality, then the latter is a careless flight from history – and into art. At the basis of the idealist naivety is the assumption that the tragic, as a mode of moral pedagogy, is still possible in modernity, even if it goes under a different form. Nietzsche’s unsurpassable claim will thus have been that this assumption is false, even if Nietzsche himself will not sufficiently spell out its consequences. “[I]f the perspectives of the philosophy of history should prove to be an essential part of a theory of tragedy,” claims Benjamin in his *Trauerspiel* study, “then it is clear that the latter can only be expected from

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\(^{52}\) Szondi, *The Tragic*, 2.


\(^{54}\) Szondi himself is ambivalent about Benjamin and does not situate him among the philosophers of the tragic in his book – he treats these thinkers chronologically from Schelling to Scheler. Following a chapter entitled “Transition,” he offers commentaries on a series of tragedies, from Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex to Buechner’s “Danton’s Death.” Benjamin is treated in the “Transition” chapter: somewhere between tragedy and the tragic.
research which shows some understanding of its own age.”55 This understanding – of tragedy’s impossibility – is what the idealists lacked. And this is what provided a series of post-Nietzschean (Jewish) thinkers with an “Archimedean point” from which to approach the question of tragedy: Benjamin refers to Franz Rosenzweig and Georg Lukacs in particular.56 To have recognized the fundamental difference between ancient and modern tragedy will have been what lends a certain “immortality” to Nietzsche’s insights.

A derivative insight from Nietzsche’s epochal contribution, according to Benjamin, was his break from the hegemony of a certain moralistic reading of tragic drama; whether in Aristotelian form – which saw the purpose of tragedy to be that of engendering a catharsis in the spectator, thereby cleansing him of the pity or the fear that was evoked by the dramatic presentation – or its continuation in the tradition of German Idealism. Such a “figurative” interpretation of the moral potential of tragedy, claims Benjamin, was really a “cheap reflection” and therefore, without real moral worth.57 It failed to recognize that “fictional characters exist only in literature. They are woven as tightly into the totality of the literary work as are the subjects of Gobelins58 into their canvas, so that they cannot be removed from it as individuals.” This, then, was the Nietzschean accomplishment: to recognize the drama as a tight mend, a totality unto itself. However, this was not worth the cost of what Benjamin saw as his reciprocal gesture: the “renunciation of any understanding of the tragic myth in historical-philosophical [geschichtsphilosophischen] terms.”59 For, the philosophy of history and the philosophy of religion (geschichts- oder religionsphilosophischen) were the domains in which the idealists saw “the

55 OGT, 102.
56 OGT, 102.
57 OGT, 105.
58 A famous French tapestry manufacturing family/company who supplied tapestries to the likes of Louis XIV.
59 OGT, 102
Nietzsche’s repudiation of idealism was too indiscriminate. Certainly, Benjamin contends, the idea that “the actions and attitudes encountered in fictional characters may be used in the discussion of moral problems in a similar way to an anatomical model” is absurd, but this should not have resulted in a sweeping dismissal. “Nietzsche turned his back on the tragic theories of the epigones without refuting them. For he saw no reason to take issue with their central doctrine of tragic guilt and tragic atonement, because he was only too willing to leave the field of moral debates to them.”

Benjamin cites the following passage from The Birth of Tragedy as a case and point.

For to our humiliation and exaltation, one thing above all must be clear to us. The entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education nor are we the true authors of this art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that the existence and the world are eternally justified – while of course our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it.

This was a grave flaw on Nietzsche’s part: to enclose tragedy – and perhaps more importantly, the spectator along with it – into a purely “aesthetic phenomenon.” Such aestheticism, says Benjamin, opens up an “abyss” between the aesthetic form of tragedy and moral domain of human action. And this abyss threatens to swallow up all that is really indispensable about the tragic: “gods and heroes, defiance and suffering, the pillars of the tragic edifice, fall away into nothing.” At this point, “all sane reflection is at an end,” and “tragedy is dissolved into visions of the chorus and the spectators.”

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60 OGT, 104.
61 OGT, 104.
62 From Nietzsche §5 (p.52), quoted in OGT, 103.
63 OGT, 103. Nietzsche offers a historical explanation for this aesthetizing claim: “the public at an Attic tragedy found itself in the chorus of the orchestra, and there was at bottom no opposition between public and chorus; everything is merely a great sublime chorus of dancing and singing satyrs or of those who permit themselves to be represented by such satyrs…The satyr chorus is, first of all, a vision of the Dionysian mass of spectators, just as the world of the stage, in turn is the vision of the satyr chorus.” Quoted in OGT, 103.
For Benjamin, on the other hand, there must be a relation between tragedy and history; but this way must somehow traverse Nietzsche’s abyss of aestheticism and not shrink before it. The route back to the “anatomical” or the “figurative” is prohibited. To be sure that this route is closed, Benjamin invokes the Bilderverbot.

‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image’ – this is not only a warning against idolatry. With incomparable emphasis the prohibition of the representation of the human body obviates any suggestion that the sphere in which the moral essence of man is perceptible can be reproduced. Everything moral is bound to life in its extreme sense, that is to say where it fulfils itself in death, the abode of danger as such. And from this point of view any kind of artistic practice [in] this life, which concerns us morally, that is in our unique individuality, appears as something negative, or at least should appear so. For art cannot, for its part, allow itself, in its works, to be appointed a councilor of the conscience and it cannot permit what is represented rather than the actual representation, to be the object of attention. The truth content of this totality, which is never encountered in the abstracted lesson, least of all the moral lesson, but only in the critical elaboration of the work itself, includes moral warnings only in the most indirect form.

It is impossible for the tragic drama, or any work of art, to somehow figure a truly moral situation or to bestow upon the spectator some abstractable moral kernel. Recall the slippery figure of the “active man” who is the subject of moral action. There is a truth to art which must ultimately do away with the “husk” of the material content, but abstraction is not the way, for Benjamin. One is bound to instrumentalize the work of art by reducing it to a vehicle for a higher moral content; and, in this same gesture, to neutralize any real moral possibilities. The truly moral or ethical moment is that which is “bound to life in its extreme sense” and not that which “imitates” it. It is by definition singular, at every moment it concerns “our unique individuality” and it is therefore immune to any representation that would not always already be an idol. The “danger” of the ethical moment cannot be mitigated in its spectacular representation. It is clear for Benjamin that there exists no abstractable moral principle which can be distilled from the tragic drama as such. There is no way to untangle warp from weft without the tapestry unraveling

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64 OGT, 105.
completely. But nor is this to say – and Benjamin claims that Nietzsche does – that there is no relation between the dramatic presentation and the singularity of the ethical moment. As long as the difference between representation – a work of tragedy – and what is represented – a singular moral situation – is kept in view, there is a way to conceive of the historical-philosophical significance of tragedy.

According to Benjamin, such a “philosophical definition of tragedy”65 is discernible in the poetic transformation of the, as it were, raw material of the hero legends into dramatic form. In this way Benjamin repeats a Nietzschean philological gesture: discerning in tragedy the poetic transformation of a more primordial myth. But, Benjamin is also clear that such reshaping is not simply a matter of discovering tragic situations among the extant legends. A certain fidelity to the legends, which concern the “pre-history of the nation [Urgeschichte des Volks],”66 is consistent. The truth of tragedy will thus be discernable only in the uniquely Greek form of such transformations. “What tendency [Tendenz] is hidden in the tragic?”

The particular piece of hero legend (Sage) which plays the most important role in Attic tragedy, according to Benjamin, is that of the sacrifice of the hero. But this is a peculiar rendering of the significance of sacrifice in tragedy. For such a sacrifice, says Benjamin, is “at once first and final [erstes und letztes zugleich].” It is a final sacrifice “in the sense of the atoning sacrifice of the gods who are upholding an ancient right [das alte Recht].”67 It is the sounding of a death knell, an immanent subversion of this primordial juridical order. But, beyond its participation in the “guilt context,” it also serves as a first sacrifice in the sense of the representative action, in which new aspects of life of the nation become manifest. These are different from the old, fatal [todbringenden] obligations in that they do not refer back to a command from above, but to the life of the...

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65 OGT, 106.
67 OGT, 106.
On The Metapolitics of Decay – Chapter 3: Tragic Happiness

hero himself; and they destroy him because they do not measure up to the demands of the individual will, but benefit only the life of the, as yet unborn, national community. The tragic death has a dual significance: it invalidates the ancient rights of the Olympians, and it offers up the hero to the unknown god as the first fruits of a new harvest of humanity.68

The sacrifice of the tragic hero, as Benjamin notes elsewhere, is “overdetermined.”69 It serves as a harbinger of two possibilities simultaneously: death and life.

It is the end of the old order of “fatal obligations.” We might call this the catastrophic dimension of tragedy. It is catastrophic in the technical sense, analogous to the comedic denouement, where the final undoing of the hero corresponds to the final unraveling of the dramatic tensions. But it is also catastrophic in the apocalyptic sense: it is that which is characterized by ruin and destruction – which, as we saw in Scholem, bears within itself the seeds of redemption.70 The catastrophic sense is thus the finality of the tragic sacrifice that Benjamin refers to. The primacy of the sacrifice – the fact that it is a first sacrifice – refers to the opening up of a new order: one that is not bound to deathly laws but instead points to “the first fruits of a new harvest of humanity.” And in this way “[d]eath thereby becomes salvation [Rettung]: the crisis of death.”71 The significance of this reversal will need to be explored in two particular contexts. First, the character of the tragic hero, who serves as the dramatic site of this catastrophe/utopia, will need to be examined in some detail. Secondly, the justification for this claim about tragedy’s epochal break will consist in the transformation from myth to drama already referred to. It will turn out to be the effect of this transformation upon the spectators that is of significance.72

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68 OGT, 106-107, my emphasis.
69 “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” in SW1, 56.
70 See Chapter 1, above.
71 OGT, 107.
72 This explains, in part, why Peter Szondi would not place Benjamin on the side of the “philosophy of the tragic” in contrast to the “poetics of tragedy.” The interest in the tragic effect is a residue of Aristotle more than Hegel. See above note 59.

76
IV. The Tragic Hero

_In the tragic...misfortune [Unrück] loses all autonomous power and meaning._

- Franz Rosenzweig

Benjamin’s meditations upon the figure of the tragic hero owe much to the work of Franz Rosenzweig. In particular, it is Rosenzweig’s insistence upon silence as the basic characteristic of the Attic manifestation of the hero, which appealed to Benjamin. However, the question of influence is a little complicated. Recall that Benjamin had already, in his 1919 essay, “Fate and Character,” attributed a good deal of significance to the silence of the hero. It was there that he claimed that the “sublimity of tragedy” consisted in “[t]he paradox of the birth of genius in moral speechlessness, moral infantality.”73 Rosenzweig’s 1921 _Star of Redemption_ could thus not have served as the origin of this insight. Nonetheless, it would come to provide an important supplement to Benjamin’s exploration of the tragic. Furthermore, the particular tendentiousness of Rosenzweig’s reading of tragedy does not seem to be of much interest to Benjamin.74

For Rosenzweig, silence is the defining characteristic of the tragic hero in its ancient Greek form. “The tragic hero has only one language that is in perfect accordance with him: precisely, silence [Schweigen].”75 Indeed, it is for this very reason that the dramatic form came into existence: in order to accommodate the aesthetic representation of silence. “In narrative poetry,” says Rosenzweig, “silence is the rule, whereas dramatic poetry knows only the spoken word, and it is only then that silence becomes eloquent.”76 Silence cannot be given voice, as it were, in any other form than drama. Whereas the hero can only appear in a narrative – or in the

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73 OGT, 204.
74 For Rosenzweig, silence serves as a pagan analogue of the defiance of Adam in the face of divine address ("The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."). A defiance which will give way to the revelation – and redemption.
75 Star, 85.
76 Star, 86.
written form of the drama – insofar as his lines are present, on the stage his appearance is not contingent upon his speech. Indeed, his appearance becomes all the more conspicuous by virtue of his silence. For Rosenzweig, silence manifests defiance: a refusal on the part of the hero to implicate himself into the web of cosmic fate or human engagement. Aeschylus serves, for Rosenzweig, as an exemplar in this case. For Aeschylus, “The heroic is mute.” Furthermore, “[i]f the great silences that last for the length of an act on the part of Aeschylus’ personages do not occur in his successors, this gain in ‘naturalness’ is purchased at a greater loss in tragic force.”

Rosenzweig goes on to make a couple of points about this tragic silence which bear upon technical concerns. Even if the heroic figures of Sophocles and Euripides seem slightly less laconic than Aeschylus’ and in fact begin to pronounce, this does not diminish the fact of their defiance. “They do not learn how to speak, they learn only how to debate.” And debate, is every bit as characteristic of defiance as is silence itself. More to the point: it is still not dialogue qua openness to another person. Likewise, the sudden outburst of lyric address characteristic of Attic drama, is not an outburst of speech properly speaking. It does not address an other in dialogue, but merely makes manifest the defiance of the hero.

The enormous importance of these lyrical and musical parts in the economy of the dramatic whole rests precisely on the fact that the Athenians did not find in the properly dramatic register, in the dialogue, the form to express the heroic and the tragic. Monologue is not dialogue. This is the point for Rosenzweig – and it is the difference between ancient and modern tragedy. He illustrates this with a comparison between Euripides’ Phaedra from his play Hippolytus and Shakespeare’s Juliet. The divinely induced love of Phaedra for the chaste Hippolytus is never consummated. For, in “the monologue, love can at most appear as unsatisfied desire; Phaedra’s misfortune [Unglück] of unreciprocated feeling is possible on

\[\text{77 Star, 86.}\]
\[\text{78 Star, 86.}\]
\[\text{79 Star, 86.}\]
antiquity’s stage.” But the same does not apply for the modern stage of “[Juliet’s] happiness [Glück] in the mutually increasing giving and having.” The point being that, “[f]rom the will of the tragic Self there is no bridge to any outside, even if this outside is another will. As defiance directed upon its own character, its will gathers all violence to the inside.”80

The silence of the tragic hero, the defiant resolve not to speak, is the signature of Attic tragedy. And, in each case, this silence culminates in the downfall of that silent protagonist. “The hero as such has to be ruined,” says Rosenzweig. But, as with Benjamin, this death is overdetermined. What death marks as the end of one life, is also the beginning of another. The hero is ruined only because his ruination makes him capable of the supreme heroic consecration: the closest self-realization of his Self. …. For this reason, the hero does not in the strict sense die…. The character dissolved in the heroic Self is immortal. For him, eternity is hardly sufficient to echo his silence.81

There is a sense in which the tragic hero survives his own death, but not as an immortal “soul” in the Platonic sense. This theory, according to Rosenzweig, was really just Plato’s attempt to make sense of the immortality of “character.”82 What Rosenzweig calls character issues in a silence which “echoes” defiantly beyond the limits which any transience might impose.

Benjamin will fill out this theme of the immortality of the tragic hero in his own reading of the Attic poets. For him, immortality is not just the result of defiance: “Rather,” he says, “this defiance is every bit as much a consequence of the experience of speechlessness as a factor which intensifies the condition. The content of the hero’s achievements belongs to the community, as does speech.”83 Thus, the “soul” of the hero which continues on beyond his death

80 Star, 87. The economy of happiness and unhappiness – of fortune and misfortune – will come to be redistributed in Benjamin’s reading: Happiness will find its place in the silence of the Attic.
81 Star, 87.
82 See, Star, 88-89.
83 OGT, 108, my emphasis.
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does not exactly transmigrate. Instead, “his soul finds refuge in the word of a distant community.”84 While it will become clear that the silence of the hero is of central importance for Benjamin, he will differ from Rosenzweig in terms of the effects of this silence. In order to see these effects, it will first be necessary to locate them. If it is the particular transformation of the mythical material under the hand of the dramatist which is the signature gesture of the tragic, Benjamin will give significant attention to the staging of these myths. And what takes place in the move to the amphitheatre is not of strictly technical concern. Myth will come to mean something quite different when it is staged publically – when it is put on trial.

V. Agon/Trial

The elements of Benjamin’s analysis of tragedy which have occupied us so far – myth, sacrifice, silence, and a certain happiness – are all finally gathered under the theme of the agon. It is here that the properly philosophical definition of tragedy, as far as Benjamin understands it, will become most clear. Benjamin makes much of this particular aspect of tragedy. He attributes the recognition of the agonal “schema” of ancient Greek culture to Jacob Burckhardt’s investigations – though it is prominent in Nietzsche’s early writings as well.85 However, the primary, if unacknowledged, source of Benjamin’s reflections would be his friend and mentor Florens Christian Rang (1864-1924), a literary theorist and Protestant theologian.

Agon refers, most generally, to a contest; the athletic agon being only the most obvious example. These contests were important elements of Greek culture which were seen to sharpen both the mind and the body.86 Along with the athletic contest, Benjamin includes the domains of

84 OGT, 109.
85 Nietzsche thus recognized the importance of speechlessness and the agon, but “had no suspicion of [silence’s] significance as a manifestation of the agonal in the tragic sphere.” OGT, 108.
law and tragedy as *agonal* in character. Benjamin’s claim is not simply the historical one: that the ancient tragedians composed their plays in order to enter them into competition with one another at the annual festivals of Dionysus. His claim is that the *agonal* structure permeates the plays themselves. In order to make the sometimes obscure observations concerning the *agon* a little clearer, it will help to have an example in mind. The *Eumenides* is a play which represents the themes that will be important for Rang and for Benjamin.

During the writing of his habilitation thesis Benjamin was in regular correspondence with Rang. The subject of the letters often touched upon the themes which Benjamin was attempting to explicate in his analysis of Attic tragedy. They thus provide an interesting and important supplement to the finished version of the *Trauerspiel* study. It was Rang who provided Benjamin with the link between *agon* and tragedy, especially in a note he sent to Benjamin in 1924 under the title “Agon and Theatre.” Along with an argument about an etymological connection between the terms *agon* and protagonist, Rang makes much of the theme of sacrifice already mentioned. Here it is situated in terms of a mythical contest. Rang reads the contest as both a verbal and physical competition – in terms of both dialogue and choreography. “The agon has it origin in a sacrifice offered to the dead,” he claims.” The person to be sacrificed may escape if he is fast enough.”

What is staged then, in the Athenian theater is a kind of race; and the pursuit of Orestes by the Furies provides a fitting example. Rang continues with the following:

> In the theater, the agonistic run is also a court, for it represents the last judgment. It cuts in two the amphitheater for a race of arbitrary duration and fixes the spatial boundary of the stage. The agonists come running from the door of damnation on the left. They run in unison – through the medium of chaos – through the half circle of the congregation gathered around the sacrificial altar and end up entering the door of salvation – at the right. As last judgment, this race absorbs the human-divine past.

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88 Cor, 232.
What seems to be at stake, then, in this *agon* is, at one level, the contest as it occurs in the dramatized myth – say, between Orestes and the Furies, both in terms of their physical run from Argos to Athens via Delphi (choreographed on a single stage), and the trial that concludes the race – but, at another level, there is a “last judgment.” A judgment of a higher order is taking place above and beyond the trial unfolding in the *Eumenides*. In the case of Rang and Benjamin – albeit in slightly different form – this higher judgment is the one pronounced upon the mythical reign of fate. Benjamin does not dispute the potential of tragedy to breach fate – he had already said as much in his “Fate and Character” essay. He does question, however, the definitiveness or the finality of this victory over paganism which Rang (in his implicitly Christian reading) seems to identify. He subsequently takes up precisely this issue with Rang. He says in a letter of January 20, 1924, that from Rang’s analysis he would “be inclined to deduce that the conclusion of a tragedy is still somehow removed from the sure triumph of the person-salvation-God principle, and that even there a kind of non liquet [i.e. to be “not clear/liquid”] lingers as an undertone.”

This small adjustment to Rang’s claims about tragedy will turn out to be central to the argument of the *Trauerspiel* book. In any case, Rang seems to have taken Benjamin’s point.

In a follow up to this letter, Rang acknowledges that “[t]he tragic resolution discovered each time is of course redemption, but a problematical one, postulated in prayer, but not realized in such a way as to preclude it from again producing conditions that would require a new resolution.” It is, he says, “not the gospel per se.” He then proceeds to explain in more detail what he sees to be at work in the tragic conclusion. “*Tragedy is the breaching of astrology and consequently the escape from the destiny determined by the course of the stars.*”

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89 Cor, 231.
90 Cor, 233. Benjamin will quote this line, almost verbatim in OGT.
91 Cor, 233.
92 Cor, 234.
supported by architectural evidence “(which has, of course, been proven in detail by architects on
the basis of the Pyramids, the Babylonian steeped temples, and the gothic cathedrals) that the
structure of religious buildings in the cultural sphere of astrological religion (which embraces all
Europe) is Uranian: in some sense, a reflection of the cosmos. Of sealed fate.”93 The agon – at
both the choreographic and the dramatic levels – would thus be that which breaks open a closed
circle. Rang continues,

I say that the theatrical half circle that provides an exit from the circle is close to the
circus that already acknowledges redemption within the sphere of astrology or fate. This
life and death race of the human sacrifice is already an agon: a contest between those
feeling and those pursuing; but it becomes this completely only if it results in the
possibility of freedom, if its conduct is predicated on the possibility of freedom. The
person who makes it to the altar within the astrological circus is, to be sure, not
sacrificed, but now his life is in thrall to the god until his dying day; the one who has
escaped from it – in the theater half circus – is a free person. This, however, is the sense
of the Greek agon at a stage that is no longer astrological: humanity’s consciousness of
victory over hieratic petrification.94

Rang, then, acknowledges Benjamin’s point, that tragedy provides a provisional victory over
fate, in terms of an uncertain judgment. He will, however, continue to insist upon the possibility
that this uncertainty can be made certain and that “the gospel per se” may come. In any case, for
both the conclusion of tragedy announces the possibility of freedom from the closed circle of
myth.

Benjamin will make much of Rang’s insights, he will even go so far as to incorporate
sections of text directly from Rang’s letters into his Trauerspiel book. But he will take this claim
about tragedy’s provisional victory and transform it into a claim about its structural ambivalence
– its paradoxical nature. Furthermore, he will combine this ambivalence with Franz
Rosenzweig’s insistence upon silence as the form of this victory. Thus, the “inner justification”
for the identification of agon and theater “lies in the dumb anguish which every tragic

93 Cor, 234.
94 Cor, 234.
performance both communicates to the spectators and displays in its characters.”⁹⁵ And, like
Rang, he will read the agonal in terms of a certain kind of trial.

The theatrical representation of the “speechless contest of the agon”⁹⁶ added an important
layer of significance to the contest. It is here that Benjamin signifies his agreement with Rang
over the second order or meta-judgment which is displayed in tragedy. The presence of
spectators was the means by which “[t]he tragic presentation of legend… acquired inexhaustible
topicity [Aktualität].” The historico-philosophical dimension of tragedy, the dimension that
Benjamin is expressly pursuing, thus becomes apparent in a certain understanding of “tragic
effect.”⁹⁷ But, if Benjamin has already ruled out – in a very precise sense – the possibility of
deriving figurative moral meaning from tragedy (as he criticized in German Idealism), in what
could this tragic effect consist? What new dimension of the myth is opened up in its performance
for the spectators; in its theatrical (re-)presentation. It is, Benjamin says,

at one and the same time a depiction and a revision of the proceedings. And with the
inclusion of the amphitheatre the dimensions of this whole trial have increased. The
community is present at this re-opening of the proceedings as the controlling, indeed as
the adjudicating authority. For its part it seeks to reach a decision about the settlement, in
the interpretation of which the dramatist renews the memory of the achievements of the
hero.⁹⁸

Recall that for Benjamin the basic truth of tragedy consists in the tendentious appropriation of
myth; specifically, the dramatic re-telling of the tale of heroic sacrifice. The tragic effect, then,
takes on a fundamentally juridical character. It remains to be seen, however, what might be
accomplished in such a re-trial.

In words that repeat his claims from the “Fate and Character” essay, Benjamin states that

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⁹⁵ OGT, 107.
⁹⁶ OGT, 107.
⁹⁷ In this way, Szondi’s ambivalence about Benjamin’s status as a “philosopher of the tragic” or an advocate of a
“poetics of tragedy” seems justified.
⁹⁸ OGT, 116. Note: the play of singularity and repetition – it is the repetition of the trial that is most important for its
philosophical meaning, yet tragedies were only meant to be performed once – at the competition.
“the decisive confrontation with the demonic world-order which takes place in Greek literature also give tragic poetry its historico-philosophical signature [ihre geschichtsphilosophische Signatur]. But this confrontation, though decisive, is not absolute. The hesitation Benjamin registered before Rang’s implicit triumphalism is here given a more precise definition. (You will notice an echo of Rang’s letter here.)

But the conclusion of the tragedy is always qualified by a non liquet. The solution [Die Lösung] is always, it is true, a redemption [Erlösung]; but only a temporary, problematic, and limited one. The satyric drama which precedes or follows the tragedy is an expression of the fact that the élan of comedy is the only proper preparation for, or reaction to, the non liquet of the represented trial.

What is achieved in the representation of the trial – in the retrial – is a backhanded victory for the accused. Such that,

what appears before the public is not the guilt of the accused [Betroffenheit des Angeschuldigten] but the evidence of speechless suffering, and the tragedy which appeared to be devoted to the judgment of the hero is transformed into a hearing about the Olympians in which the hero appears as a witness and, against the will of the gods, displays ‘the honor of the demi-god.’ The profound Aeschylean impulse to justice inspires the anti-Olympian prophecy of all tragic poetry.

The hero’s silence has the subversive effect of undoing the old order of law. But the manner in which this undoing proceeds is not purely anarchic. The ancient statutes under which the hero stands accused have a double effect: they inflict both suffering and guilt. The genius of the hero is to divide this effect; to accept suffering and refuse guilt. Silence is the means by which this

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99 OGT, 109/GS 1.1, 288, translation modified.
100 Benjamin will also refer to this incomplete achievement as the victory of paradox over ambiguity. The tragic is to the demonic what paradox is to ambiguity. In all the paradoxes of tragedy – in the sacrifice, which in complying with ancient statutes, creates new ones, in death, which is an act of atonement but which sweeps away only the self, in the tragic ending with grants the victory to man, but also to god – ambiguity, the stigma of the daimons, is in decline. (OGT, 109)

Demonic ambiguity is not straightened out by a limit-marking monotheism, it is answered with paradox. But paradox is already a victory of sorts.
101 OGT, 116-117. The fact that the competitions into which the Attic poets entered their plays included three tragedies and one Satyr play or comedy. Note: the only proper reaction to the non liquet is comedy – the Trauerspiel is not a comedy, but it is a “parody” of tragedy. See OGT, 113.
102 OGT, 109/GS 1.1, 288, translation modified.
separation is effected: In his silence, the hero “neither looks for nor finds any justification, and therefore throws suspicion back on to his persecutors.” Thus, for the spectators what the trial displays is not, first of all, the guilt of the accused but the unjustified suffering that is imposed upon him. This is why the trial in the tragedy – of Orestes, for instance – which was ostensibly about the guilt or innocence of the accused becomes, in the public representation of the trial, “a hearing about the Olympians.” In this way all ancient tragedy becomes, Benjamin claims, “anti-Olympian prophecy.”

VI. Conclusion

I want to conclude this chapter by noting two things about this “anti-Olympian prophecy.” I want to bring attention to its negativity and to its futurity. Both of these dimensions speak to the indeterminacy of the achievement which is won in tragedy. That is, they qualify the happiness which it occasions. Benjamin’s claim in the “Fate and Character” essay, which was the impetus for this entire investigation into Greek tragedy, was that “happiness is…what releases the fortunate man from the embroilment of the Fates and from the net of his own fate.” Furthermore, that it is “not in law but in tragedy that…but demonic fate is breached.” To say that the happiness, exemplified in ancient drama, is what breaches fate is to say that what takes place is an immanent and not a transcendent break. To be sure it is modernity which is the inexorable – not to say fateful – horizon of Benjamin’s interpretation; and it is a certain promise of modernity which is intimated in the anti-Olympian prophecy. But Benjamin is at pains to emphasize the

103 OGT, 109.
104 OGT, 109. Note the quasi-legal means by which the legal order is undermined:
The hero, who scorches to justify himself before the gods, reaches agreement with them in a, so to speak, contractual process of atonement which, in its dual significance, is designed not only to bring about the restoration but above all the undermining of an ancient body of laws in the linguistic constitution of the renewed community.(115)
105 SW1, 203.
indeterminacy of this promise and to conceptualize it as a potentiality already latent in the antique pagan. It is not his task to disclose the inevitable victory of the one God over the many or of a linear time over a cyclical one. For, while he refers to Cohen’s insights, he does not assign the full significance to monotheism that Cohen does. Instead he is interested in the initial moment of rupture. What is achieved in the breaching of fate is not commensurate to the flight of the gods. Instead, he seeks to identify a rupture which will have made a new epoch possible. The question of what might arrive in the wake of this rupture is a different one. When Benjamin does move on to speak of the condition of modernity, of the Christian west – that is, of the epoch which has confronted the world of myth – it will not in fact be a world which has done away with the demonic or with fate. In fact, it will prove itself to be deeply mired in it; even if it will now go by the name of original sin.
Chapter 4: Allegorical Happiness

I. The German Baroque

The late-Scholastic logicians devised amusing helps to memory by which the many forms or figures of syllogism (conclusions from a major and a minor premise) could be remembered. These mnemonic devices consisted of words of three syllables partly real and partly made up for the purpose. Each syllable stood for one of the three propositions, and the vowels therein signified the character of these propositions. The vowel \( a \), for instance, denoted a general and positive statement; the vowel \( o \), a partial and negative one. Thus the nice name \textit{Barbara}, with its three \( a \)s, designates a syllogism that consists of three general and positive propositions (for instance: “All men are mortal – all mortal beings need food – consequently all men need food”). And for a syllogism consisting of one general and positive propositions and two partial and negative ones (for instance: “All cats have whiskers – some animals have no whiskers – consequently some animals are not cats”), there was coined the word \textit{Baroco}, containing one \( a \) and two \( o \)s. Either the word, or the peculiarly roundabout fashion of the train of thought denoted by it, or both, must have struck later generations as particularly funny and characteristic of the pedantic formalism to which they objected in medieval thought; and when humanistic writers, including Montaigne, wished to ridicule an unworldly and sterile pedant, they reproached him with having his head full of “Barbara and Baroco,” etc. Thus it came about that the word \textit{Baroco} (French and English \textit{Baroque}) came to signify everything wildly abstruse, obscure, fanciful, and useless (much as the word \textit{intellectual} in many circles today). (The other derivation of the term from Latin \textit{veruca} and Spanish \textit{barueca}, meaning, originally, a wart and by extension a pearl of irregular shape, is most improbable both for logical and purely linguistic reasons.)

Such is the etymology offered by Erwin Panofsky. An analysis of the vague yet ubiquitous term – the era it named, the works collected under it – was the subject of Panofsky’s 1934 lecture, “What is Baroque?” Here the famed German historian of art sought finally to rescue the Baroque not only from a faulty etymology, but from infamy. Panofsky had read Benjamin’s book on the German “Mourning Play,” and apparently had objected to the way Benjamin deployed his research on melancholy. Nevertheless, there striking parallels between the two projects. The

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2 Benjamin relies heavily upon the analysis which Panofsky undertook with Fritz Saxl on the theme of melancholy in the medieval and renaissance periods; especially the etchings of Dürer (See below). Irving Lavin notes a possible comparison between the two projects, but wrongly, I believe, characterizes Benjamin’s analysis of the Baroque as
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most obvious of which is the common concern with tracing the origins of modernity to precisely this period. The Baroque, according to Panofsky, “is not the decline, let alone the end of what we call the Renaissance era. It is in reality the second great climax of this period and at the same time, the beginning of a fourth era, which may be called ‘Modern’ with a capital M.”

But even more importantly, it was the overlapping effort to highlight what the bourgeois version of modernity – the very same modernity which looked with a belittling distain upon the aesthetic practices of the Baroque, still stifled, as they saw it, by the limitations of a theological perspective – had completely lost sight of. As we shall see, for all of its melancholy and pessimism, the Baroque held for Panofsky and for Benjamin, a certain vision of happiness.

In the case of Benjamin, the “elegiac happiness” of the Trauerspiel will look quite different from the “hymnic happiness” of the Greeks. While there will be a repetition of certain elements of the ancient theatre – and already here, with the question of repetition, we are in a world other than Attic tragedy – at the level of happiness, there is no comparison. Consider Pindar, whose odes convey the bliss of the Greeks. “Never has poetry been less winged,” says Benjamin with respect to the Baroque. “The reinterpretation of ancient tragedy is no less strange than the new hymnic form which represented an attempt to equal the flights of Pindar – however obscure and baroque these may have been.”

The Baroque failure of the hymnic, however, is one that its poets will recognize and emphasize. The heights of bliss are out of reach, as is the “small homunculus happiness” which characterizes the bourgeoisie of Benjamin’s Germany. The happiness Benjamin seeks to redeem from the early modern German drama is one that will

“degenerate.” “Panofsky’s concrete, humane, sympathetic, and modern evaluation of the Baroque contrasts markedly – and I sometimes think deliberately – with that of Walter Benjamin who, while he also saw the Baroque as the beginning of the modern era, interpreted the style pessimistically as a kind of paroxysm of allegory, and essentially degenerate.” (206, n22)

3 Panofsky, Three Essays, 88.
4 OGT, 200.
5 See chapter 2 above.
pursue the antithesis of bliss – lament – and only thereby attain to the happiness.

The interpretation of the Baroque with which Panofsky and Benjamin took exception goes something like this.

[Baroque], a word of Portuguese origin originally applied to irregular, oval-shaped pearls; it was used to design a style that was no longer austere and simple. This new style sought to employ all the methods and conventions of classical rhetoric and of the architectural and decorative style of late antiquity. In literature it exhibited exuberant or exaggerated moods of tenseness and turgidity, and accentuated sensationalism and affectation in subject matter as well as in language, in the emotions of the lyrical poets and the behavior of dramatic characters. In the fine arts it was characterized by complicated lines and theatrical arrangements, by grandiose and explosive gestures, by sophisticated design and far-fetched allegories. Baroque architecture used twisted and bloated columns and broken architraves; décor delighted in deep, unmixed colors and iridescent gilding, heavy brocade and taffeta draperies. The century’s men of fashion paraded in stately Spanish court dress, the ladies wore heavy bodices and full, weighty farthingales.\(^6\)

While many of the observations contained in this synopsis of the Baroque are germane, even obvious, it is the subtle – and not so subtle – judgments of value that will mark the points of divergence from Benjamin and Panofsky. The old etymology is only a symbol of this larger disagreement. For Benjamin’s part, the allegorical element of the Baroque was of prime importance. Whether or not they were “far-fetched” was a judgment which stood outside of Benjamin’s concern with what he will call the “truth content” of the German theatre of this period. As for its “tenseness and turgidity”: these were not necessarily dimensions which stood in opposition to the truth content, but insofar as they are identified with the theological perspective of the playwrights in question, Rose’s perspective resonates with Benjamin’s.

Only the German literature of the period did not achieve the greatness of its European contemporaries. It was too deeply involved in dogmatic and denominational quarrels, and rarely attained the spiritual freedom that characterized even such a devout catholic as Calderon. Literature in the mother country of the Reformation never quite succeeded in shaking off the burdensome yoke of theology, and as a result its actual accomplishments seldom measured up to the laudable intentions of the poets.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Rose, *German Literature*, 113.
Benjamin’s analysis will not dispute the less refined nature of the German Baroque vis-à-vis the achievements of other European countries. In fact, the Spanish Catholic Pedro Calderon (1600-1681) will be a constant point of reference for Benjamin. But, for Benjamin, the success of the Spanish theatre was not solely the “spiritual freedom” their dramatists had achieved. It may in fact be the case that theology served as a “burdensome yoke” to the “laudable intentions” of the German dramatists. However, Benjamin will not finally look to such intentions for the truth of the Trauerspiel. His task is to discern the “historico-philosophical” significance of these “Mourning Plays.” In this case theology was no impediment, neither to the plays nor to the method which sought to critically understand them; it was the only way to proceed. “For a critical understanding of the Trauerspiel, in its extreme, allegorical form, is possible only form the higher domain of theology; so long as the approach is an aesthetic one, paradox must have the last word.”\(^8\) The specifics of this theology, and the paradox it is said to overcome, will have to be explored in more detail. At this point a further word on the specifically German form of drama is important.

**The Mourning Play**

The Trauerspiel, the early modern “mourning play,” was the product of the German Baroque which covers, roughly, the period between the Reformation and the Enlightenment (1570-1720).\(^9\) Benjamin’s analysis covers a series of Protestant German playwrights: specifically, Andreas Gryphius (1616-1664), Johann Christian Hallmann (1640-1716), and Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (1635-1683). These poets were a part of what was known as the Silesian school of German drama. For these poets, the Trauerspiel represented a certain coming to terms with the historical situation of the counter-reformation and especially the violence of the Thirty Years War

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\(^8\) OGT, 216.  
(1618-1648). This was a period of transformation and uncertainty. New configurations of ecclesial and state power were emerging; questions of sovereignty were being reimagined; political violence was widespread. Silesia, furthermore, “was a buffer zone between the Habsburg will to carry forward the Counter Reformation and the Protestant movement toward an even greater religious individualism, and the intense battle between these opponents produced an especially vigorous literature.”

According to Benjamin, these mourning plays were not intended to induce sadness so much as they were plays through which mournfulness would find satisfaction. They were “plays for the mournful.” The particular extravagance of the literary Baroque – and its unique access to happiness – was manifested in its melancholic character: it displayed a creation that mourned its fallenness; its hopelessness; its unredeemed and transient state. The mourning plays served as a series of glosses upon the historical and political (and theological) situation of the period by penetrating to their metaphysical source. Thus, as Max Pensky notes, the “Trauerspiel does not offer some manifest commentary on these historical events. Rather, the experience of historical catastrophe itself is incorporated into the structure and the content of the work, becoming the controlling premise of dramatic action, the fixed metaphorical referent for the generation of dramatic language.” In these plays what was put on display was the catastrophe of historical existence itself and the transience that characterized all natural and human endeavor. The plays, in a very predictable and formulaic manner, most often involved figures of royalty who faced an inevitable – fateful – downfall. For this and other reasons, it was not uncommon for these mourning plays to be compared to the great tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. But they were understood by most critics to be poor imitations of their Greek predecessors. It was the task of

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10 Rose, German Literature, 119.
11 OGT, 119.
12 Melancholy Dialectics, 75.
Benjamin’s habilitation thesis to offer a novel interpretation of these plays. More specifically, it was his task to find the truth content of this form of artistic creation. Thus, his interest in the Trauerspiel genre was partially professional. Benjamin was trying to mark out a territory for himself in the German academy – an attempt that did not come to fruition as his habilitation thesis was rejected by both the departments of German studies and Aesthetics at the University of Frankfurt. But, in terms of Benjamin’s larger corpus, these explorations into Baroque theatre represent an important element.

A Small History of Secularization

Within Benjamin’s analysis of the Trauerspiel (his analysis of its material content), there is a theory of secularization. It is a theory which can be said to characterize European modernity, even if it is elaborated in the miniature context of the development of a particular artistic form. This secularization is apparent in the transfiguration of the medieval “mystery play” into the form of the Baroque drama. If the distinction between tragedy and Trauerspiel will be disclosive of a certain metaphysical truth, then the differentiation of the mystery play and the mourning play will likewise shed some light on the latter.

What remains consistent in both the mystery play of the middle ages and the mourning play of the early modern era is the presence of a certain kind of “tragedy” – the scare quotes are necessary because, as Benjamin notes, this is an appropriation only of the “content” and not the “form” of tragedy (i.e. it limits tragedy to a sorry scenario) and, furthermore, the medieval dramatists in particular were limited to what they “read into what little they know of the subject

On the affinities between Benjamin’s attempt to rescue the German Baroque and those of his contemporaries, see Jane Newman’s Benjamin’s Library: Modernity, Nation, and the Baroque (Cornell University Press, 2011).
matter of ancient drama."\(^{14}\) What is significant for Benjamin is that despite the differences between the mystery play and the Trauerspiel, they share an assessment of history as tragic. Thus, a specifically historiographic form of writing – the medieval Christian “chronicle” – and the dramatic form would become virtually indistinguishable in the Baroque. It is the incorporation of this mode of the tragic – refracted through history as the story of downfall and catastrophe – into these respective dramatic forms which interests Benjamin. The fundamental difference between these two forms, however, becomes clear in the “secularization” of the form of the mystery play.

The mystery play was a medieval, specifically English, form of drama. These plays staged biblical scenes in dramatic form. By focusing on biblical texts of a certain kind – the fall of Lucifer from heaven, for instance – they incorporated a “tragic” element, with its catastrophic denouement. But, as was the case with the medieval historical “chronicle,” this was always seen as one moment in a larger process: namely, the history of salvation (Heilsgeschichte).\(^{15}\) In this way, historical action could still be seen as meaningful: as signifying an end – in the dual sense of the word. The Baroque manifestation of this phenomenon, however, no longer integrated historical action into the divine order of history (Heilsprozess).\(^{16}\) “The relationship of the Trauerspiel to the mystery-play is called into question by the insuperable despair which seems necessarily to be the last word of the secularized Christian drama.”\(^{17}\) What Benjamin means by “secularized” is precisely this loss of a providential telos which would bear some relation to historical action. However, this is not commensurate to the abandonment of a religious framework. Indeed, “religious aspirations did not lose their importance: it was just that this

\(^{14}\) OGT, 78.
\(^{15}\) OGT, 78, cf GS1.1, 257.
\(^{16}\) OGT, 78, GS1.1, 257.
\(^{17}\) OGT, 78.
century denied them a religious fulfillment, demanding of them, or imposing on them, a secular solution instead.” This did not occur by virtue of an occlusion of traditional religious forms under a secularizing publicity, but by an intra-ecclesial enmity. Namely, the Thirty Years War, which crowned the post-Reformation fragmentation of the church with a violent and protracted series of conflicts. Such an experience seems to have undone the experience of continuity in the Christian tradition. The religious division of Europe, according to this subtly historicist argumentation, left the Baroque poets without recourse to the full eschatological arc of the Christian narrative; even a negative recourse was impossible, according to Benjamin. That is, even the route of heresy required a minimal continuity in order for a “heterodox nuance of doctrine and conduct” to be displayed.

Since therefore neither rebellion nor submission was practicable in religious terms, all the energy of the age was concentrated on a complete revolution of the content of life, while orthodox ecclesiastical forms were preserved. The only consequence could be that men were denied all real means of direct expression.

The image of a unified or universal church remained in effect, even if the reality of animosity prevailed in concrete life. The protest of the poets was not a direct one: a certain kind of immanent critique would be performed – literally – by the Baroque playwrights. The secularizing work of the Trauerspiel poets would not be the subversion of the dominant religious forms as a kind of foreshadowing of revolutionary France. The task was to “not so much transfigure the world...as cast a cloudy sky over its surface.”

Whereas the painters of the Renaissance know how to keep their skies high, in the paintings of the Baroque the cloud moves, darkly or radiantly, down towards the earth. In contrast to the Baroque, the Renaissance does not appear as a godless and heathen period, but as an epoch of profane freedom for the life of the faith, while the Counter-

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18 OGT, 79. The description of the early modern predicament of secularization sounds remarkably like Benjamin’s own methodological approach to modernity.
19 OGT, 79.
20 OGT, 79.
21 OGT, 79.
Reformation sees the hierarchical strain of the middle ages assume authority in a world which was denied direct access to a beyond. 22 Benjamin describes a scenario in which law has lost its higher mandate, but has not therefore ceased to exist or exercise its spectral authority. The Baroque world was denied the theological assurances of an eschatological consummation, on the one hand, and the secular freedom which accompanies a disempowered ecclesial authority, on the other. Nevertheless, the Baroque poets’ goal was not to unsettle the stability and security of an ecclesiastically maintained “absolutist constitution.” 23 “In philosophical-historical terms its idea was the acme: a golden age of peace and culture, free of any apocalyptic features, constituted and guaranteed in aeternum by the authority of the Church.” 24

History, not eschatology, was the content of the Trauerspiele; not the higher history of Heilsgeschichte, but profane, fallen history. Thus,

from the outset these efforts remained confined to a context of strict immanence, without any access to the beyond of the mystery plays and so, for all their technical ingenuity, limited to the representation of ghostly apparitions and the apotheoses of rulers. It was under such restrictions that the German Baroque grew up. Small wonder that this occurred in an eccentric and so all the more intensive way. 25

The withdrawal of an eschatological horizon of consummation – which is not the same thing as the loss of the possibility of a catastrophic end – had, as a consequence, the attempt on the part of the Baroque poets, “to find, in a reversion to a bare state of creation, consolation for the renunciation of a state of grace.” 26 This took the form of recourse to stoic morality: it did not seek a new revolutionary future, but an infinite series of quasi-natural cycles of downfall and restabilization. One manifestation of this morality, according to Benjamin, is visible in the

22 OGT, 79.
23 OGT, 56.
24 OGT, 80.
25 OGT, 80.
26 OGT, 81. Benjamin continues, “Here, as in other spheres of Baroque life, what is vital is the transposition of the originally temporal data into a figuratively spatial simultaneity.” OGT, 81.
spatialization or reification of the originally temporal character of redemption.

Whereas the middle ages present the futility of world events and the transience of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German *Trauerspiel* is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition. Such redemption [*Erlösung*] as it knows resides in the depths of this destiny [*Verhängnisse*] itself rather than in the fulfillment of a divine plan of salvation [*Heilsplan*]. The rejection of the eschatology of the religious dramas is characteristic of the new drama throughout Europe; nevertheless the rash flight into a nature deprived of grace, is specifically German.\(^{27}\)

What the medieval playwrights plotted along a temporal axis – suffering *now* will be redeemed in the *hereafter* – was transformed in the 17\(^{th}\) century into a “figurative spatial simultaneity.”\(^{28}\)

The locus of redemption, such as it was capable of imagining, became the royal court, the divine judge was replaced by the sovereign, but all too human, prince. Before going into more detail about this sovereign creature and his court, however, more needs to be said about the non-eschatological historicity of the mourning play; specifically about this “rash flight into a nature deprived of grace.”

**Natural History as Content**

Benjamin, like Nietzsche, discerned the origins of Attic tragedy in the dramatization of more ancient hero-legends. These pre-historical myths or legends (*Sage*) served as the content of the plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus. Their transformation into dramatic form, the transformation which yields the philosophical-historical significance of tragedy for Benjamin, displayed the possibility of a break from the tyranny of the gods in the representative figure of the tragic hero. The hero presented, for the spectators, the possibility of a break with the orders of fate. For the *Trauerspiel* playwrights, on the other hand, owing partly to the disenchantment just elaborated, it was history itself which served as the content of their plays – and this is what furnishes *its* philosophical-historical significance. This history, however, is not the one which might oppose

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\(^{27}\) OGT, 81.GS 1:1, 260.

\(^{28}\) OGT, 81.
itself to the mythical cycles of fate. As we shall see, as natural history, it is comprehensively bound up with a certain kind of fate. The recognition of a consignment to the profane order of nature – which is to say a fallen creation whose rhythms are transience and decay – left no exit strategy. It was “not moral transgression but the very estate of man as creature which provides the reason for the catastrophe.” Their predicament could justifiably be called a quagmire. Bogged down in the muck of fallen creation, gazing upon a cloudy and circumscribed historical horizon, the dramatists of the 17th century directed their focus inward: toward the spatially limited royal court in order to elaborate this theology of history.

It is a strange history, indeed: spatial instead of temporal; circumscribed by immanence; infinite, perhaps, but only in terms of reflection and repetition; redeemable only according to the profane, creaturely judgment of the prince. The history which unfolds according to these conditions is a kind of “playful miniaturation of reality.” Benjamin likens it to the temporality of divine creation. “The sequence of dramatic actions unfolds as in the days of creation, when it was not history which was taking place.” Creation, in this sense, is not a temporally extended duration within which moral action takes place, but a kind of delimited microcosm that “absorbs history back into itself.” Again, unlike Attic tragedy, this is not a tendentious recourse to pre-history – such that it might open up history to new possibilities. The invocation of creation is somewhat paradoxical in that it does not thwart, but indicates secularization. Thus we have

the comprehensive secularization of the historical in the state of creation. It is not eternity that is opposed to the disconsolate chronicle of world-history, but the restoration of the

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29 OGT, 89.  
30 See the 1916 sketch, “Trauerspiel and Tragedy”: “The mourning play exhausts artistically the historical idea of repetition.” SW1, 57. See also OGT, 83, where Benjamin speaks of the “introduction of a reflective infinity of thought into the finite space of a profane fate.”  
31 OGT, 83.  
32 OGT, 91.
timelessness of paradise. History merges into the setting.33

Invoking the same comparison he does in the methodological Prologue to the book, where he describes the monadological structure of history, he relates this notion of history to Leibniz’s infinitesimal method. “In both cases,” he says, “chronological movement is grasped and analyzed in a spatial image.”34

The particular way that the Baroque puts this spatialization to work is in the form of the royal court (Hof). “In the Trauerspiel the court represents the timeless, natural décor of the historical process.”35 In the court, “the setting par excellence,”36 the political merges with the natural as the recurring process of transience and decay.

The constantly repeated drama of the rise and fall of princes, the steadfastness of unshakeable virtue, appeared to the writers less as a manifestation of morality than as the natural aspect of the course of history, essential in its permanence.37

Along with the sovereign, about whom more will be said, the courts which the Baroque dramatists conjure are populated by other figures: the corrupt courtiers, or intriguers. And “[t]o understand the life of the courtier means,” according to Benjamin, “to recognize completely why the court, above all else, provides the setting of the Trauerspiel.”38

The significance of the recurrence of this figure of the prince’s underhanded privy-counselor consists, on the one hand, in his encouragement of the dramatic action. “Baroque drama knows no other historical activity than the corrupt energy of schemers.”39 Furthermore,

33 OGT, 92.
34 OGT, 92.
35 OGT, 93.
36 OGT, 93.
37 OGT, 88.
38 OGT, 88.
39 OGT, 88. Samuel Weber provides a helpful commentary on this figure of the intriguer. “[A]longside the tyrant and martyr, is the intriguer, schemer, or perhaps better: plotter. For the plotter—der Intrigant—is related to the plot (die Intrige) not just lexically, but semantically and etymologically, as Benjamin’s argument makes clear. If the term “intrigue” derives from the Latin intrigare, “confuse, confound,” such confusion is inseparable from a tendency of the Baroque to which Benjamin attaches considerable importance: its “projection of temporal process into space,”
this scheming courtier or “intriguer,” revealed something of the “life of the soul” which the dramas meant to display. In this respect, “the intriguer is without equal.”

The court official, the privy-councilor, who has access to the prince’s cabinet where the projects of high politics are conceived, is presented…, his power, knowledge, and will intensified to demonic proportions.

In the figure of the corrupt courtier what is evoked in the spectator is not pity or fear, but, according to a “Baroque Aristotelianism,” mourning (Trauer). His capacity for “strict inner discipline and unscrupulous external action” reveals a character stripped of all naivety. His calculations, likewise, encourage the transformation of the temporal into the spatial.

[T]he deeds of the courtier and the action of the sovereign who, in conformity to the occassionalist image of God, is constantly intervening directly in the workings of the state so as to arrange the data of the historical process in a regular and harmonious sequence which is, so to speak, spatially measurable.

A completely different “court,” then, emerges here than did in the Athenian amphitheater. The trial (of Orestes in the Eumenides) and the retrial (of the Olympians before the spectators) had the effect of opening history to new possibilities, invisible within the circumscribed mythical domain of fate. The acquittal of Orestes, and more importantly, the non-liquet of the tragic conclusion spoke not of calculability and spatialization, but to an epochal rupture. This transformation of time into space which is accomplished by the actions of the courtier of the Trauerspiel, leads Benjamin to another aesthetic conclusion: Trauerspiel is the precursor of dance.

In contrast to the spasmodic chronological progression of tragedy, the Trauerspiel takes place in a spatial continuum, which one might describe as choreographic. The organizer of its plot, the precursor of the choreographer, is the intriguer. (95)

and in particular into that particular space known as the “court” (GS1, 271; Origin, 92). Benjamin’s –abilities, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008), 141-142.

40 OGT, 98.
41 OGT, 97-98.
42 OGT, 100.
43 OGT, 98.
44 OGT, 97.
The contrast is even more striking in light of the choreographic significance that Benjamin’s friend Florens Christian Rang attributed to tragedy. Recall the “agonal race” which would have been presented theatrically. Here the movement of the hero and his pursuer cuts open the closed circle of mythology by traversing the circle in a straight line – from stage right to stage left. Here, on the other hand, no “door of salvation” exists.

**A theory of Sovereignty: Sovereign as Creature**

Out of the fateful transience of natural history there is no genius to lift his head, as was the case in tragedy. If there is a happiness to be attained in this play of mourning, it will not come about through the heroic breaching of fate. Though the tragic hero is most often a figure of royalty, this parallel with the Trauerspiel highlights more of a difference than a similarity. The Baroque “hero,” usually a king or a prince, represented not the potential of a new human community to live beyond fate, but stood as “the representative of history…[who] holds the course of history in his hand like a scepter.” In contrast to the representative status of the tragic hero, this figure brought to light the inevitable decline of everything historical: a decline which no one would survive.

The constantly repeated drama of the rise and fall of princes, the steadfastness of unshakeable virtue, appeared to the writers less as a manifestation of morality than as the natural aspect of the course of history, essential in its permanence.

Against the backdrop of a new theory of sovereignty that was emerging in the 17th century, one that concerned the prerogative of the prince to claim exceptional powers in times of crisis or states of emergency, the prince of the Trauerspiel was often cast as a tyrant. Benjamin

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45 OGT, 65.
46 OGT, 88.
relies here on Carl Schmitt’s explication of the concept of sovereignty which advocated for the
instituted capacity for a sovereign “decision,” even or especially in the situation where no
positive law applied. That is, the sovereign would be capable of declaring a “state of exception”
where the normal legal apparatus or even the constitution itself would be suspended. In this legal
vacuum, where the force of law is withdrawn, the authority of the prince would nonetheless
remain. This emerging theory of sovereignty as the capacity to “decide on the exception,”
Benjamin says, “had its origins in the counter-reformation.” It was in this context that the
Baroque playwrights were coming to terms with historical existence.

Schmitt’s project was not simply a history of politics. As Benjamin was no doubt aware,
Schmitt was attempting to revive this doctrine of sovereignty for the modern context of Weimar
Germany; buttressed not just by the theorists of the counter-reformation, but also by the 19th
century “counterrevolutionary philosophers of the state” – notably, Spanish Catholic Donoso
Cortes. In his call for a mode of sovereign power which resisted the enfeebling tendency of
liberal indecision (i.e. parliamentarianism) he simultaneously called for a resistance to liberal
theology (i.e. deism). This political theory was, for Schmitt, every bit as much a theological one.
According to Schmitt, “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized
theological concepts.” What this meant for Schmitt was that whatever limits were set in the
domain of theology regarding the sovereignty of God would apply, analogically, to the power of
the earthly sovereign in the political domain. What Schmitt wanted to highlight was that the
sovereign, in his capacity to decide, was analogically related to the sovereign of heaven. A good
sovereign, a good state, was one which could maintain order and stave off chaos due to a strong

47 Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, trans. George Schwab
(University of Chicago Press, 1985).
48 OGT, 65.
49 PT, 36.
decisiveness. This decisiveness which could transcend legality was the essence of Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.” It was the rapturous nature of this decision which lead Jacob Taubes to refer to Schmitt’s “apocalyptic from above.”

For the Baroque writers, however, the sovereign – who oscillates between the figure of martyr and tyrant — was characterized, most of all, by a profound “indecisiveness.” “The prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of emergency,” says Benjamin, “reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision.” The sovereign, it turns out, is not a divine or even divine by analogy (Schmitt); he represents no victory over the forces of natural decay that characterize creaturely existence. Where the Schmittian sovereign was to be the singular immutable will against chaos, what characterized the princes of the Trauerspiel was “not so much the sovereignty evident in the stoic turns of phrase, as the sheer arbitrariness of a constantly shifting emotional storm.” He was, in short, every bit as entwined with natural history as the rest of the cast. He too was a creature.

“However highly he is enthroned over subject and state, his status is confined to the world of creation; he is the lord of creatures, but he remains a creature.” The sovereign was a tyrant plagued by indecision – which most often resulted in madness. But, as a representative of history, he was also, in some sense, a martyr.

The enduring fascination of the downfall of the tyrant is rooted in the conflict between the impotence and depravity of his person, on the one hand, and, on the other, the extent to which the age was convinced of the sacrosanct power of his role… For if the tyrant falls, not simply in his own name as an individual, but as a ruler and in the name of mankind and history, then his fall has the quality of a judgment, in which the subject too

50 Schmitt, Political Theology, 7.
51 “Carl Schmitt thinks apocalyptically, but from above, from the powers” in Jacob Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, Afterward, 142.
52 OGT, 71.
53 OGT, 71.
54 OGT, 71.
55 OGT, 85.
The Trauerspiel thus offered no satisfaction to the spectator in the downfall of the “hero.” It offered no consolation and no possibility of an earthly overcoming of the transience of natural history – of fate. The “judgment” that the drama executed upon the martyr-tyrant was also a judgment upon historical life as such. Earthly life can hold out no hope for transformation: it was doomed to suffer the transience of nature, whose proxy force was discerned in the political violence of history.

**Fate as Original Sin**

Fate, as was noted in the “Fate and Character” essay, is a guilt-imputing context which entangles man at the level of his natural life. At the level of “mere life” humankind – and not just humankind – is an undifferentiated and continuous species. This natural guilt sticks to the characters of both tragedy and Trauerspiel. A distinction, however, is to be made in terms of its function in each case. Of paramount importance, for Benjamin, is the way in which fate is confronted. In tragedy the closed circle of fate is breached in the agonal run, even if it comes at the cost of the hero’s life. In the mourning play, on the other hand, fate is dealt with.

In order to analyze this Baroque concept of fate, he will look not just to the dramas of the 17th century German poets, but to the contemporary Spanish dramatist Calderon and to the early 19th century form of the “drama of fate” (Schicksalsdrama). In the Spanish (and Roman Catholic) variant of the Baroque form, the Christian gloss of original sin becomes most legible.

Fate, whatever guise it may wear in a pagan or mythological context, is meaningful only as a category of natural history in the spirit of the restoration-theology of the Counter-Reformation. It is the elemental force of nature in historical events, which are not themselves entirely nature, because the light of grace is still reflected from the state of creation. But it is mirrored in the swamp of Adam’s guilt. …The core of the notion of fate

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56 OGT, 72.
is, rather the conviction that guilt (which in this context always means creaturely guilt — in Christian terms, original sin — not moral transgression on the part of the agent), however fleeting its appearance, unleashes causality as the instrument of the irresistibly unfolding fatalities. Fate is the entelechy of events within the field of guilt.  

Much the way it functioned in tragedy, fate remains tied to guilt. But, the Christian theological layer that is applied to it in the case of the mourning play adds something: it becomes ineradicable, in much the same way that Kant speaks of “radical evil” — another variation of “original sin.” It is less the result of a particular historical act — even if it can be seen as a pre-historical “act” — and more the very context of all historical action. It is, as Benjamin says in the 1916 sketch, “the guilt context of the living.” It is natural, as though it inhered in creatureliness as such, it is as deeply rooted as it can be. There is no question here of escaping fate.

The structural differences between ancient and modern fate are one aspect of Benjamin’s analysis. Another is its distribution. If fate represents the very context of all natural life, then it is no longer something oracularly dispensed to certain characters, but instead something that proliferates universally. Such distribution is appropriate to the collective nature of the “hero” in the mourning play. For, the Trauerspiel “has no individual hero, only constellations of heroes.”

Thus, the fateful death of the tragic hero was individual. In the Trauerspiel, on the other hand, “it frequently takes the form of a communal fate, as if summoning all participants before the highest court.” The invocation of a juridical scene will provide us with a final moment of contrast between Trauerspiel and tragedy. But first, it should be noted, that the democratically dispersed nature of guilt does not stop with the heroes. It extends even to world of things.

Destiny [Verhängnis] is not only divided among the characters, it is equally present among the objects...For once human life has sunk into the merely creaturely, even the

57 OGT, 129.
58 SW1, 202.
59 OGT, 132.
60 OGT, 136.
life of apparently dead objects secures power over it. The effectiveness of the object where guilt has been incurred is a sign of the approach of death. The passionate stirrings of creaturely life in man – in a word, passion itself – bring the fatal property into the action.\footnote{OGT, 132.}

The perdurance of fate even into the world of objects also contributes to the distinction between ancient and modern drama and their respective deployments of fate. A part of what allowed for the decisiveness of Attic tragedy’s break with fate, according to this reading, is the fact that fate had no object to cling to once the hero had passed. But the stage of the mourning play, much like the foreground of Dürer’s \textit{Melancholia I}, was littered with objects. Thus, “if tragedy is completely released from the world of things, this world towers oppressively over the horizon of the \textit{Trauerspiel}.”\footnote{OGT, 134.} These two aspects of the Christian Baroque deployment of fate – the plurality of heroes and the prevalence of stage property – further emphasize the spatializing tendency that Benjamin saw in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century dramas. The drama is heavy, as it were, with objects – human and otherwise. The space par excellence, as was mentioned, was the royal court.

\textbf{II. Melancholy Dialectic}

The effect of fate – the circumscription of the domain of possible historical action – as it was conceived in the German Baroque derives not just from the fact that these poets were Christians, such that fate was conceived of in terms of the doctrine of original sin, but that they were Lutherans. The Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation, though an inheritor of the same Augustinian concept, nonetheless conceived of the possibility of meaningful action in the world. It had, Benjamin claims, “penetrated profane life with all the power of its discipline.”\footnote{OGT, 138, translation modified. GS 1.1, 317.} And the other major wing of the magisterial reformation, Calvinism, was less dire in its perspective on

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{61} OGT, 132.
\bibitem{62} OGT, 134.
\bibitem{63} OGT, 138, translation modified. GS 1.1, 317.
\end{thebibliography}
profane life. It was the Lutherans, however, whose characteristically antinomian stance vis-à-vis secular life, was the seedbed of a certain gloom.

The rigorous morality of its teaching in respect of civic conduct stood in sharp contrast to its renunciation of “good works.” By denying the latter any special miraculous spiritual effect, making the soul dependent on grace through faith, and making the secular-political [weltlich-staatlichen] sphere a testing ground for a life which was only indirectly religious, being intended for the demonstration of civic virtues, it did, it is true, instill into the people a strict sense of obedience to duty, but in the great men it produced melancholy [Trübsinn].

In the Lutheran renunciation of “good works,” lay, on the one hand, the “worldly asceticsim” which Max Weber understood as a spiritual withdrawal from profane life which nonetheless did not result in a retreat to a cloistered existence. This tendency, which affected Calvinism as well, however, was especially pronounced among Lutherans due to what Benjamin identifies “an element of German paganism.” That is, “the grim belief in the subjection of man to fate [Schicksalsverfallenheit].” In this case, “Human actions were deprived of all value.” And it is this perspective which gave rise to the real novelty of the German Baroque: the theological production of “an empty world.” The horizon of profane life, in this case, lacked any inherent moral significance. As was mentioned, the full arc of the Christian narrative of salvation was short-circuited: the time of earthly existence was seen to be one of transience and decline, as natural history with no positive relation to a Heilsgeschichte. This much has been noted. What is highlighted here is the moral conundrum which presents itself in this situation. If human action bears no relation to any higher purpose, and yet remains in thrall to an inscrutable divine will, what possibilities for historical action still remain? Many were able to make do with the contradiction, but not everyone. This was not the case for the “thoughtful men of the age.” “For

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64 OGT, 138.
66 OGT, 138.
67 OGT, 138. my emphasis.
those who looked deeper saw the scene of their existence as a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions. The result was melancholia.

This melancholic predicament was characterized by a strange automatic or “motorial” resistance to such a hopeless scenario: “Life itself protested against this.” Benjamin continues,

It feels deeply that it is not there merely to be devalued by faith. It is overcome by deep horror at the idea that the whole of existence might proceed in such a way. The idea of death fills it with profound terror.

What was lacking in terms of transcendental satisfaction was then compensated for in mourning (Trauer). For mourning, according to Benjamin, “is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction [rätselhaftes Genügen] in contemplating it.” Such satisfaction is comparable to the “elegiac happiness” Benjamin will later apply to Marcel Proust. Thus, mourning, the Trauer of the Trauerspiel, did not signify merely sadness – though this was most certainly present. Through the cloud of gloom which gathered above the world, a gaze was able to penetrate the cold dry earth with an uncommon intensity. Trauer was, therefore, as much a “feeling” (Fühlen) as a phenomenological method: “Mourning,” claims Benjamin, was “capable of a special intensification, a progressive deepening of intention.” In this way, Benjamin claimed “pensiveness [Tiefsinn],” and not merely despondency, to be “the characteristic above all of the mournful.”

On the one hand, then, Lutheran asceticism fostered, in the thoughtful men of the age, a sense of alienation from the world of action – and an accompanying sense of mournfulness. Yet,

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68 OGT, 139.
69 OGT, 139. The “feeling” which conditions this protest is described as follows:
For feelings [Gefühle], however vague they may seem when perceived by the self, respond like a motorial reaction to a concretely structured world. If the laws which govern the Trauerspiel are to be found, partly explicit, partly implicit, at the heart of mourning, the representation of these laws does not concern itself with the emotional condition [Gefühlszustand] of the poet or his public, but with a feeling [Fühlen] which is released from any empirical subject and is intimately bound to the fullness of an object. (Ibid.)
70 OGT, 139.
71 OGT, 139.
72 OGT, 139-140.
on the other hand, such melancholia – Benjamin does not conceptually distinguish mourning from melancholia – returned the alienated gaze to this very same world in a seemingly irrepressible desire to save it. However, in this return, the objects of contemplation take on another sense entirely. Thus, says Benjamin, “the most simple object appears to be a symbol of some enigmatic wisdom because it lacks any natural, creative relationship to us.” And it was furthermore, “set in an incomparably productive context.”

Such a dialectic – the theological negation of the world and the negation of the negation of the world, as it was reconstituted under the melancholic gaze – only becomes possible according to the particular situation of the Baroque. Yet, it is already anticipated in the great works of the Renaissance. In Albrecht Dürer’s engraving, *Melancholia I* (1514), for instance, the utensils of active life are lying around unused on the floor, as objects of contemplation. This engraving anticipates the Baroque in many respects. In it the knowledge of the introvert and the investigations of the scholar have merged as intimately as in the men of the Baroque.

The relationship between debilitating sadness and extreme attentiveness constitutes a dialectic of melancholia which Benjamin seeks to elaborate. But here, as elsewhere, the German Baroque is read in light of its prehistory. Benjamin, relying heavily upon the work of Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl and also Karl Giehlow, uses the Medieval and Renaissance theories of melancholy to make sense of the specifically seventeenth century German variety. “[P]osterity,” he says, “possesses a more direct commentary on the Trauerspiel than the poetics could provide.” In particular, Benjamin sees this background as providing a means of interpreting the

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73 OGT, 140.
74 OGT, 140.
75 OGT, 140.
77 OGT, 142.
actions of the prince and the courtier – the indecisive tyrant and the unfaithful schemer of the
Trauerspiel. Indeed, for the Baroque, “the prince was the paradigm of the melancholy man.” In
Gryphius’ Leo Armenius, the title character describes the prince as by no means immune to the
specter of mourning. “The king sees himself…[as] a man full of miseries, and one that feels them
as well as any other common person.”

Benjamin traces the dialectic of melancholy through Aristotle, where “genius is linked
with madness within the concept of melancholy;” the medieval theory of the humors, where
melancholy was associated with “black bile;” the Renaissance, exemplified in Dürer’s etching
and the theories concerning the planet Saturn; and finally, the Baroque, where melancholy is seen
to “emerge from the depths of the creaturely realm.” In this latest stage, the theory of
melancholy, says Benjamin, “became crystallized around a number of ancient emblems, into
which it was, of course the unparalleled interpretive genius of the Renaissance which first read
the imposing dialect of these dogmas.” These emblems – the dog, the sphere and the stone – all
of which are present in Melancholia I, bear on the matter of melancholia. However, it is one
emblem in particular which gives itself to the theological conceptualization which finally
informs the Baroque perspective.

It may be that all that is to be seen in the emblem of the stone are the most obvious
features of the cold, dry earth. But it is quite conceivable…that in the inert mass there is a
reference to the genuinely theological conception of the melancholic, which is to be
found in one of the seven deadly sins. This is acedia, dullness of the heart, or sloth.
Assuming such a connection is conceivable, assuming the largest of the disused objects which
surround Dürer’s melancholy angel presents an image of sloth, then something of the theological

78 OGT, 142.
79 OGT, 143.
80 OGT, 147.
81 OGT, 146.
82 OGT, 151-152.
83 OGT, 155.
significance of the *Trauerspiel* becomes more apparent. For reasons other than confessional allegiance, Benjamin will claim that the truth of the *Trauerspiel* is legible “only from the higher domain of theology.” Both the indecisive prince and the scheming courtier are brought into relief with this insight. The poets of the German Baroque are not simply careless or heavy-handed in their portrayal of royal intrigue. They are, Benjamin wants to say, driven by a theological reasoning.

The fall of the tyrant is caused by indolence of the heart. Just as this characterizes the figure of the tyrant so does unfaithfulness…characterize the figure of the courtier. It is not possible to conceive of anything more inconstant than the mind of the courtier, as depicted in the *Trauerspiel*: treachery is his element. It is not a sign of superficiality or clumsy characterization on the part of the authors that, at critical moments the parasites abandon the ruler, without any pause for reflection, and go over to the other side. It is rather that their action reveals an unscrupulousness, which is in part a consciously Machiavellian gesture, but is also a dismal and melancholy submission to a supposedly unfathomable order of the baleful constellations, which assumes an almost material character. Crown, royal purple, scepter are indeed ultimately properties, in the sense of the drama of fate, and they are endowed with a fate, to which the courtier, as the augur of this fate, is the first to submit. His unfaithfulness to man is matched by a loyalty to things to the point of being absorbed in contemplative devotion to them. Only in this hopeless loyalty to the creaturely, and to the law of its life, does the concept behind this behavior attain its adequate fulfillment…Loyalty is completely appropriate only to the relationship of man to the world of things.

A theologically inspired melancholy thus conditions the Baroque perspective; it explains the seemingly bizarre actions of the prince and the courtier. That is, it explains their particular *Schicksalsverfallenheit*, their subjection to fate as it is borne in the “world of things.” Such a “hopeless loyalty to the creaturely” also conditions the characterization of the *Trauerspiel*.

But Benjamin does not provide this analysis simply as an apology for the idiosyncrasies of the playwrights. It expresses something of the truth of the *Trauerspiel* which Benjamin is attempting to uncover – and which will find its fullest explication in the analysis of allegory. The Baroque emblem-books will come to serve as the essential schema for allegory. Nonetheless,

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84 OGT, 216.
85 OGT, 156.
even here, something more is at work. The dialectic of melancholy which motorially fixes the
mournful gaze upon the unredeemed world – to seek the downfall (Untergang) of the world, as
the “Theologico-Political Fragment” has it – also seeks to rescue, if not redeem it.

Clumsily, indeed unjustifiably, loyalty expresses, in its own way, a truth for the sake of
which it does, of course, betray the world. Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of
knowledge [Wissens]. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its
contemplation, in order to redeem [retten] them. … The persistence which is expressed in
the intention of mourning, is born of its loyalty to the world of things.86

Given the role that knowledge (Wissen) played Benjamin’s reading of Genesis, there is
something amiss about betraying the world for its sake. Yet, read dialectically, this search for
knowledge in its decidedly fallen form – Wissen as opposed to Erkenntnis – is capable of joining
up again with a redeemed, if not redeeming, intention. The melancholic, in refusing to turn away
from the fallenness of nature/history, will find a disillusioned and dialectical access to
redemption.” In such melancholy,” claims Irving Wohlfarth, “the Fall contemplates itself, and
thereby arrests its downward momentum.”87

The elements of the Trauerspiel are not absent from the early modern dramas composed
outside of Germany. As mentioned, the aesthetic achievements of Spain, or in this case, England,
sometimes provide Benjamin with a model against which to measure the German works. If
melancholia proceeds dialectically from despair through a transient nature in the desire to rescue
the objects of contemplation, then it is in Shakespeare that the dialectic comes full circle and the
desire to rescue nature – or in Hamlet’s case, his own self – from the confinement to fate is
achieved. Among the mourning plays, “Hamlet alone is a spectator by the grace of God,” says
Benjamin. That is, “his life, the exemplary object of his mourning, points, before its extinction,
to the Christian providence in whose bosom his mournful images are transformed into a blessed

86 OGT, 157.
87 Wohlfarth, “Motifs,” 49.
existence. Only in a princely life such as this is melancholy redeemed, by being confronted with itself. “Only Shakespeare was capable of striking Christian sparks from the Baroque rigidity of the melancholic, un-stoic as it is un-Christian, pseudo-antique as it is pseudo-pietistic…it is only in this prince that melancholy self-absorption attains to Christianity.” Where the German Trauerspiel was not capable of this recognition of itself within the Christian narrative: “it remained astonishingly obscure to itself.”

Such obscurity will not be a problem for Benjamin, indeed, the study concludes with an apocalyptically inflected celebration of the ruin and the fragment as finally more disclosive of the truth of modernity than the whole. In any case, the historical detour which gave rise to the dialectic of melancholy will prove to be essential for understanding the allegorical character of the Trauerspiel. What the analysis of melancholy provides is an essential context and a paradigmatic spectator. “The images and figures presented in the German Trauerspiel are dedicated to Durer’s genius of winged melancholy. The intense life of [Germany’s] crude theatre begins in the presence of this genius.”

It is worth pointing out that the dialectic of melancholia is an early formulation of what will eventually become the dialectic of happiness. The fact that the antithetical terms melancholia and happiness are interchangeable already indicates as much. So, in the case of the dialectic of melancholia, mourning produces both an empty world – by negating any natural plenitude – and thereby produces a more enigmatic plenitude – in the negation of emptiness. As the next section will make clear, this enigmatic significance is owed to the arbitrary accrual of infinite possible significances. As for the dialectic of happiness: the originary happiness of bliss

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88 OGT, 158.
89 OGT, 158.
90 OGT, 158.
91 OGT, 158.
(Seligkeit) which issues in the hymn of praise, is negated by elegy. But such songs of mournfulness, nevertheless retains a connection to happiness – now as Glück or fortune.

III. Allegory

The move to allegory will serve several functions in Benjamin’s argument. It will, most importantly, set the semiotic and theological basis for the truth of the Trauerspiel. Allegory will come to be the means by which the dialectic of melancholy once again joins the theological (eschatological) truth it had lost in its “hopeless loyalty to the creaturely.” The theological basis of allegory, will prove that “[t]he seven years of its melancholic immersion will have been but a day in the eyes of God.” The head of Durer’s angel will not be lifted, but a layer of significance will be added to the dialectic of melancholy – i.e. the hinge between immersion and redemption. But the analysis of allegory will also provide essential elements for the argument of the current project. The happiness of tragedy was the unfulfilled promise of a new human community which was no longer in thrall to the gods or destined to the workings of fate. The happiness of allegorically conditioned Trauerspiel will likewise come about in the escape from the fate-determined consignment to nature. But it will only come through this melancholic intensity. Happiness and downfall will coincide in the Baroque – in an elegiac happiness.

Allegory and Happiness

“…the only pleasure [Divertissement] the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory.”

A fascination with the world of antiquity is something characteristic of the German

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92 This is Benjamin’s image. It is apparently a gloss on 2 Peter 2:8, according to which, “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” See OGT, 232.
93 OGT, 185.
Baroque; even if this interest in the ancient past was not strictly philological. There was something deep and mysterious – indeed something dangerous – about it: not just by virtue of a temporal distance, but because it was also a “secret storehouse of invention.” 94 The humanists of the Italian Renaissance were some of the first to explore this storehouse. What they discovered, among other things, was the enigmatic world of hieroglyphics. One commentator notes: “In its early stages that study was stimulated above all by the recovery of Greek sources (among them a Greek text of the Hieroglyphica of Horapollo, a kind of dictionary of 189 hieroglyphs originally composed probably in very late antiquity and brought…from Andros to Florence in 1419) and their translation by humanists….” 95 He notes further that, “[t]he first Renaissance book on ancient hieroglyphs was written by Pierio Valeriano, whose Hieroglyphica appeared in 1556.” 96 Benjamin, recognizing this link in the genealogy of allegory which would find its way into the early modern German theory of allegory, cites Valeriano. 97 In introducing his study, Valeriano expounds a natural theology in order, it seems, to guarantee a degree methodological freedom for his explorations. “Not even a consideration of trees or of vegetation is gratuitous in our purposes.” Indeed, this was the case with “Blessed Paul and David before him,” who recorded “the majesty and awesomeness of God…understood by means of a knowledge of the created universe.” Valeriano claimed that “men of proper sensibility” needed to recognize the deep, if enigmatic, significance of hieroglyphics. Even if the method was not strictly philological, it did not fall prey to syncretism. It remained, by virtue of a natural theological basis robust enough to encompass the whole of creation (including pagan antiquity), consistent with Christianity. The enigmatic wisdom encoded in the hieroglyphic images were thus not outside of this domain of

94 OGT, 171.
96 Dempsey, Renaissance, 365.
97 The specifically German analysis of hieroglyphics will be explored below.
divine creation. For, “everything contained in heaven, the air, in water and on the earth has been produced for the sake of man [Hominis causa].”\footnote{98}

The Renaissance fascination with antiquity will continue into the Baroque. And the attempt to theologically neutralize its demonic potential will, likewise and with greater vigor, condition the latter’s appropriation of hieroglyphics and the production of its own version: the emblem-book. In many ways, at least according to Panofsky’s interpretation, the Baroque should not be seen as a departure from the Renaissance, but as an intensification of its basic impulses.\footnote{99} What will change, however is the “humanism” that will define the Baroque in opposition to the Renaissance. Thus, in order that the “for the sake of man,” this “Hominis causa,” which concludes the above citation be read teleologically, Benjamin is quick to point out, in his commentary on Valeriano, just what kind of humanism is at work here. “‘Hominis causa’ should not be considered in terms of the teleology of the Enlightenment, for which human happiness [Menschenglück] was the supreme purpose of nature, but in terms of a quite different, Baroque, teleology.”\footnote{100} While it does single out man from among the rest of creation, this Baroque teleology does not aim at the “earthly” or “moral happiness of creatures [Glückseligkeit der Katuren].” Instead,

its exclusive aim is their mysterious instruction. From the point of view of the Baroque, nature serves the purpose of expressing its meaning, it is the emblematic representation of its sense, and as an allegorical representation it remains irremediably different from its historical realization. In moral examples and in catastrophes history served only as an aspect of the subject matter of emblems. The transfixed face of signifying nature is victorious, and history must, once and for all, remain contained in the subordinate role of stage-property.\footnote{101}

There is happiness, so it would seem; but what kind of happiness remains “irremediably different
from its historical realization”? It would be, at best a distraction (*Divertissement*),\(^{102}\) the fallenness of creation refracted through play (*Spiel*). For, as Benjamin notes, the melancholic permits himself this one “pleasure [*Divertissement*],” and, as Benjamin notes, “it is a powerful one.”\(^{103}\)

The “elegiac happiness” of the German Baroque does not correspond to the humanism of the renaissance in large part because the renaissance human is not sufficiently a *creature*. Or, better, such a human happiness does not reflect the truth of creation – a creation which *mourns*. Recall Benjamin’s words from the “Language” essay: “It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament [*klagen*] if it were endowed with language.”\(^{104}\) While the “blissful Adamite spirit” of the original creation is gone, the task of speaking of and for creation remains. Now, however, such a speaking of and for means a disillusioned look upon decay. Human happiness cannot emerge, no hymn can be raised, amidst the quiet cacophony of nature’s lament – “even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament.”\(^{105}\) Thus, the Baroque achievement of happiness – as elegy and not as hymn – is a disillusioned happiness which it discovers through, not despite, the fall.

**Defining Allegory**

With the Baroque emerged a *modern* form of allegory; one which differed from the Medieval notion which consisted in “a conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its abstract meaning.”\(^{106}\) Allegory for the *Trauerspiel* poets, and for Benjamin, is not merely


\(^{103}\) OGT, 185.

\(^{104}\) SW1, 73. See Chapter 2 above.

\(^{105}\) SW1, 73.

\(^{106}\) OGT, 162.
a literary device, but itself a “form of expression [Ausdruck].”107 It is not an accoutrement to language, but itself expressive of content. Medieval allegorical exegesis sought the truth of its object, not in what appeared, but in what was latent as a metaphysical and literary possibility behind appearance. The Baroque, similarly, sought a truth which was other than what appeared; but this truth was best exposed, not simply by means of its reinterpretation, but in the ruin of appearance. What is signified is, first of all, fragmentation. “In the field of allegorical intuition, the image is a fragment, a rune . . . the false appearance of totality is extinguished.”108 Allegory fixates upon what has been destroyed, but it is also constructive. Fragments and ruins become, in the allegorical perspective, both the realia of natural history, the manifestation of the “empty world,” and the raw material for ever new assemblages, infinite possible configurations. There is a kind of apotheosis which can be anticipated, which can call to a definitive halt to these “inauthentic”109 constructions, but “the Baroque apotheosis,” says Benjamin, “is a dialectical one. It is accomplished in the movement between extremes.”110 The route to redemption, such as it is, can be sought only in the depths of sin. The significance of this dialectical route is brought out most clearly as allegory is distinguished from the symbol.

Following a dominant trend in both neo-classicism and romanticism, Benjamin’s analysis proceeds by outlining the difference between symbol and allegory. But, in place of the consistently negative judgment placed upon the latter in favor of the former, his task is to rescue allegory from its infamy. The theory of the symbolic is essentially a secularized theological concept. “The unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox

107 OGT, 162, GS 1, 1, 339.
108 OGT, 176.
109 OGT, 139.
110 OGT, 160.
of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence.”\textsuperscript{111} In
the aestheticized symbol, the explicitly theological element drops off and the critic faces what he
imagines to be a fleeting glimpse of the absolute within the material work of art. Accompanying
the emergence of this secularized symbol was a theory of allegory. But allegory was here serving
only an instrumental role. It was merely “adapted so as to provide the dark background against
which the bright world of the symbol might stand out.”\textsuperscript{112} The symbol, on the other hand, which
was seen to be “the true nature of poetry,” allowed for a vision of the universal within the
particular which did not denigrate particularity. Benjamin cites Goethe: “Whoever grasps the
particular in all its vitality also grasps the general, without being aware of it, or only becoming
aware of it at a later stage.”\textsuperscript{113}

Much the way Trauerspiel was understood by the dominant schools of criticism to be a
lesser approximation of Greek tragedy, allegory was largely dismissed as being an impoverished
imitation of the symbol. The problem with these denigrations of the allegorical, according to
Benjamin, is that they fail to appreciate its \textit{dialectical} nature. The aestheticized symbol of
classicism lacks “dialectical rigor,”\textsuperscript{114} and as such “fails to do justice to content in formal
analysis and to form in the aesthetics of content.”\textsuperscript{115}

The work of art was not a site where the eternal could be glimpsed momentarily, as the
romantic theorists claimed.\textsuperscript{116} This was an illusion that too quickly dispensed with a more
primary transience. However, the achievement of the romantic school was to bring out the
\textit{temporal} aspect of the symbolic and the allegorical. This, in turn, provides Benjamin with what

\textsuperscript{111} OGT, 160.
\textsuperscript{112} OGT, 161.
\textsuperscript{113} OGT, 161.
\textsuperscript{114} OGT, 160.
\textsuperscript{115} OGT, 160.
\textsuperscript{116} On this point Benjamin engages primarily Georg Friedrich Creuzer’s (1771 –1858) work on mythology.
he needs to provide a “formal definition”\textsuperscript{117} of allegory in its properly dialectical form.

According to the romantics, the “measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooded interior.” But, in opposition to this immediacy, allegory tarries in the material world for too long, creating a temporal lag. Allegory, he says,

\begin{quote}

is not free from a corresponding dialectic, and the contemplative calm with which it immerses itself into the depths which separate visual being from meaning, has none of the disinterested self-sufficiency which is present in the apparently related intention of the sign.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

There is a “violence” inscribed in this dialectical delay. It consists in instituting a gap between the material and the transcendental which the symbol ostensibly joins together in the mystical instant. What the allegorist encounters in this duration is natural history. Herein is constituted the Mourning Play’s unique relationship to the material world; its unique encounter with the truth of history; and the reason for its deep sadness.

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the \textit{facies hippocatica} of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death’s head.\textsuperscript{119} And although such a thing lacks all ‘symbolic’ freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the Baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance.\textsuperscript{120}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{117} OGT, 166.
\item \textsuperscript{118} OGT, 165-166.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Benjamin will place a line from one of playwright Daniel Casper von Lohenstein’s \textit{Trauerspiele} as the epigraph to the final section of the book. It reads as follows: “Yea, when the Highest comes to bring in the harvest from the graveyard, so will I, a death’s-head, become and angel’s countenance.” (OGT, 215)
\item \textsuperscript{120} OGT, 166.
\end{itemize}
The transience of nature, the sorrow and unsuccess of history will, for the Trauerspiel, shine forth much brighter than any remnant of paradise. In this sense the Trauerspiel stages not so much a bleaker interpretation of history as the melancholy characteristic of history itself – *qua natural* history. But, insofar as this unflinching gaze into the abyss of sheer finitude is caught up in the dialectical “movement between extremes,” allegory will come to be the hinge upon which a certain “about turn into salvation” becomes possible. But such a turn cannot be anticipated prematurely, nor sought out through any route besides that of decaying natural history. “In the true work of art,” Benjamin says, “delight [*Lust*] knows how to make itself fleeting, how to live in the moment, disappear, become new.” The Baroque work of art, on the other hand, “wants nothing more than to endure, and so clings with all its organs to the eternal.” And the eternal, recall, is precisely transience, decay, and ruin – all of which have their source in *guilt*, as we shall see.

**The Ruin**

This transience, furthermore, is represented, not in dramatic actions of eternal significance, but in the stage props which display the decay of history. Thus, Benjamin claims of the dramatist Hallmann, that he “paints eternal life from the standpoint of the prop room.” The Baroque preference for ruins as the backdrop for the staging of Trauerspiele, speaks, for Benjamin, of more than just a new aesthetic practice: it offers “a corrective to art itself” and, with this, a philosophy of history.

The allegorical physiognomy of natural history, which is brought onstage in the

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121 OGT, 166.
122 A more recent and accessible translation of selected sections of Benjamin’s *Origin of German Tragic Drama* has been provided in Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: Belknap Press), 2008. (WA, hereafter), 182. OGT, 181.
123 WA, 182, in context: “‘Thus, one must press forward through death into that life / That turns Egypes night into Goshen's day for us / And grants us the pearl-studded robe of eternity!’ This is how Hallmann paints eternal life from the standpoint of the prop room. A stubborn clinging to props thwarted the portrayal of love.” OGT, 180.
124 WA, 176.OGT, 176.
Trauerspiel, is actually present as ruin. In the ruin, history has merged sensuously with the setting. And so configured, history finds expression not as a process of eternal life, but rather as one of unstoppable decline.\textsuperscript{125}

Such decline was an ontological condition. It may have become more apparent, or perhaps accelerated, in the wake of the Thirty Years War, but the origin of such a downward tendency are traceable to the fall, in its specifically Christian interpretation. That is to say, unlike Benjamin’s own interpretation, the failure of the first human couple was first of all a moral one: guilt was set to work in the human heart and in history by virtue of Adam’s choice. The – specifically aesthetic – task then was not to reverse or repair the decline of natural history. Instead it was to take the ruin and allegorically transform it. There was a miraculous dimension to this practice, but its possibility lay only along the path of the profane.

What lies shattered amid the rubble, the highly significant fragment, the scrap: this is the noblest material of Baroque creation. For it is a common feature of Baroque literature to heap up fragments – incessantly and without any strict idea of a goal – and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to view stereotypes as instances of intensification.\textsuperscript{126}

And if this miraculous possibility rested solely on the side of a \textit{deus ex machina}, then the aesthetic “preparation” for such a miracle would not consist in anything other than the exacerbation of the fallen condition. Trauerspiel would be a mimetic art form, however, the nature it attempts to mirror would have to be the same nature which the theological and historical situation of the Baroque imposed upon it.

The writer was not supposed to conceal his combinatory practice, since the center of all intended effects was not the mere whole but rather the work's manifest constructedness... Nature has thus remained, one might say, the great teacher for the writers of this period. Yet nature appears to them not in the bud and blossom but in the overripeness and decay of its creations. Nature looms before them as eternal transience, in which the saturnine gaze of those generations was the only one that recognized history.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{125} WA, 180. OGT, 177.
\textsuperscript{126} WA, 180. OGT, 178.
\textsuperscript{127} WA, 180-181.OGT, 179.
There is a certain “enjoyment” that is possible, even necessary, in the carrying out of such constructions. The great accomplishment of the Baroque consists, despite its reputation, in a penetrating access to the philosophical truth of the work of art. The following quotation makes this clear.

The object of philosophical criticism is to show that the function of artistic form is precisely this: to make historical material content [Sachgehalte], the basis of every significant work of art, into philosophical truth content [Wahrheitsgehalten]. This restructuring of material content into truth content makes the weakening of effect, whereby the attractiveness of earlier charms diminishes decade by decade, into the basis for a rebirth in which all ephemeral beauty completely falls away and the work asserts itself as a ruin. In the allegorical constructions of the Baroque Trauerspiel, these ruined forms of the redeemed [geretteten] work of art have always stood out clearly.

IV. A Theological Method

This chapter has followed Benjamin’s analysis of the Baroque by beginning with an examination of the particular form of the German Trauerspiel. It focused upon its historical, political, and theological context; the structure of its composition; the characters, the actions, and the temperament which were typical of the era and the dramatists. The second part focused on the allegorical perspective which informed the Baroque and contributed in significant ways to its aesthetic production. However, it is only when allegory is understood in its properly theological context that it will serve the purpose Benjamin is proposing. Thus he concludes his study by pointing in the direction of the theological method characteristic of the Baroque and necessary for an understanding of its aesthetic productions.

128 Benjamin cites the critic J. Petersen to the effect that “‘Science cannot lead to the naive enjoyment of art [Kunstgenuss], any more than geologists and botanists can awaken a feeling for the beauty of landscape’: this assertion [he adds] is as unconvincing as the analogy that aims to support it is misguided” (WA, 184/OGT, 182).

129 WA, 184. OGT, 182.
Benjamin’s own method, he admits, may have “occasionally seemed vague.” Its effect, as most readers will attest, is to bestow a whole range of material upon the reader while providing a less than transparent framework by which to understand it. It is possible to assign to this vagueness an academic inadequacy, a failure on the part of its author to coherently present aesthetic and historical data. This was, in fact, the conclusion of the departments of both German Literature and Aesthetics at the University of Frankfurt, where Benjamin’s Habilitation bid was unsuccessful. However, it is also possible to see within Benjamin’s analysis a method which he himself is abiding by; namely: allegory. That is, while the material presented to this point consisted of only the “farthest-reaching connections [weitgreifendsten Zusammenhängen],” it is under the “idea of the Trauerspiel” that these disparate elements are “gathered [versammelt]” and “collected [zusammen].” For, as he has noted, it is the “court” of allegory which is “subject to the law of ‘dispersal’ and ‘collectedness’ [‘Zerstreung’ und ‘Sammlung’].” But, in order for Benjamin’s allegorical collection to succeed, the methodological inclusion of theology becomes as necessary for him as it was for the Baroque.

If, in the concluding part of this study, we do not hesitate to use [theological] concepts, this is no metabasis eis allo genos [transition to a different subject]. For a critical understanding of the Trauerspiel, in its extreme, allegorical form, is possible only from the higher domain of theology. Benjamin’s philosophical method, theological as it may be, is not identical to that offered by the Baroque, with its decidedly Christian perspective. These differences and similarities will be elaborated in more detail as we look to the difficult Prologue to the Trauerspiel book in the next chapter. However, on Benjamin’s advice, we will defer an investigation of this difficult methodological apparatus until the end of the present analysis. In any case, the need for a

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130 OGT, 216.
131 OGT, 216/GS1, 390. (translation modified)
132 OGT, 188.
133 OGT, 216.
theology to resurrect and regather the ruins of allegorical fragmentation is especially necessary for the Baroque where such fragmentation permeated even the human body. As Benjamin notes, “[i]n the Trauerspiel of the seventeenth century the corpse becomes quite simply the pre-eminent emblematic property. The apotheoses are barely conceivable without it.”

**Christianity and Allegory: Guilt and Redemption**

The allegorical perspective which informs the mourning play is decidedly Christian in origin: “allegory itself was sown by Christianity.” And it is the Christian doctrine of original sin, as it has been noted, which determines transience of nature not just as decay, but as guilt.

The allegorically significant is prevented by guilt from finding fulfillment of its meaning in itself. Guilt is not confined to the allegorical observer, who betrays the world for the sake of knowledge, but it also attaches to the object of his contemplation. This view, rooted in the doctrine of the fall of the creature, which brought down nature with it, is responsible for the ferment which distinguishes the profundity of western allegory from the oriental rhetoric of this form of expression.

This double determination of nature – as transience and guilt – Benjamin claims, is what links creation to mourning. It is what gives melancholia an ontological status. The fall as described in the book of Genesis, and, similarly, in Benjamin’s own commentary, was the fall of humankind, but nature was implicated as well. Benjamin cites his own insight into the relationship between naming and mourning from his language essay of 1916 almost verbatim. The slight adjustments that are made to the citation in the present case, however, modify both named and namer. Of the named – nature – it is fallenness and guilt which are highlighted – as opposed to Benjamin’s earlier attention to the mediating role of language. In the earlier piece, it was *language* that had fallen. Of the namer – the human – Adam’s role is taken over by the

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134 OGT, 218-219.
135 OGT, 224.
136 OGT, 224.
137 See Chapter 1.
allegorist who does not name, but “reads” fallen nature.\(^\text{138}\)

Because it is mute, fallen nature mourns. But the converse of this statement leads even
deeper into the essence of nature: its mournfulness makes it become mute. In all
mourning there is a tendency to silence, and this infinitely more than inability or
reluctance to communicate. The mournful has the feeling that it is known
comprehensively by the unknowable. To be named—even if the name-giver is god-like
and saintly [Seliger: i.e. blissful] – perhaps always brings with it a presentiment of
mourning. But how much more so not to be named, only to be read, to be read
uncertainly by the allegorist, and to have become highly significant thanks only to him.
\(^\text{139}\)

But, the allegorical concentration upon the guilt of nature had what might be called a redemptive
dimension to it. Beyond a pleasure that might be taken in the spectacle of downfall – whether the
decay of things in nature or the ever new manifestations of the tyrant’s fall on stage – there was
an attempt to rescue. “For an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue
them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory.”\(^\text{140}\) What is most characteristic of
the Baroque allegory for Benjamin, and what he sees as its most important contribution to a
concept of historical action as \emph{happiness}, is the particular method it employs to rescue things.

The Fall of creation meant two things which are fundamental to allegorical concept of
happiness. First of all it meant that nature was subject to mortification; it was forced to bear what
Paul called its “bondage to decay.” But, by virtue of its being \emph{created}, “the light of grace is still
reflected in the state of creation.” Even if, Benjamin adds, “it is mirrored in the swamp of
Adam’s guilt.”\(^\text{141}\) That is, \emph{creation is guilty but redeemable}. But lest this redeemability be seen as
a residue of grace which could be seized upon, as a symbol of unsullied divine creation, the
Baroque, according to Benjamin, construes the relationship between fall and redemption as

\(^{\text{138}}\) The adjustments to this citation no doubt have to do with the emphasis of the study in question. However, another
difference between the two forms of this insight consists in the extent to which it is Benjamin’s own perspective. In
the 1916 essay it is Benjamin’s own metaphysical speculations that are at work. In this case, however, it is a
perspective Benjamin is attributing to a specifically Christian and Baroque insight. It is not clear that this is a
perspective Benjamin is endorsing – though it is not entirely clear that he is \emph{not} endorsing it either.
\(^{\text{139}}\) OGT, 224-225.
\(^{\text{140}}\) OGT, 223.
\(^{\text{141}}\) OGT, 129.
dialectical. The ultimate interest in the redemption of nature cannot but follow the detour of history – in its downward movement. That is, not in an ascending movement toward virtue. It was only at the end of such a descending detour that salvation could be considered. It was the unique role of allegory to map this route through history to salvation. The fallenness of creation was thus both a reason for mourning, but as such a signpost of something else. Indeed, “the more nature and antiquity were felt to be guilt-laden, the more necessary was their allegorical interpretation, as their only conceivable salvation. For in the midst of the conscious degradation of the object the melancholic intention keeps faith with its own quality as a thing in an incomparable way.”

This dialectic which unflinchingly faces the fallenness of creation and thereby (and only thereby) holds out for its redemption contains a concept of happiness which I hope to explain. But, Benjamin already warns against one such form of this concept. “[I]t would be mistaken,” he says,

or, at least, it would be superficial, to attribute to delight [Lust] in antithesis for its own sake those numerous effects in which, visually or only verbally, the throne room is transformed into the dungeon, the pleasure-chamber into a tomb, the crown into a wreath of bloody cypress.

There is a theological and a semiotic safeguard against deriving enjoyment from the equivocations and the sheer arbitrariness with which allegory seems to proceed. The semiotic safeguard is the emblem book – that cache of images and accompanying interpretations which served as a definitive key for the deployment and interpretation of allegory. The theological safeguard, which ultimately secured the semiotic, was God.

Indeed, “the allegorical intention [would] fall from emblem to emblem down into the dizziness of its bottomless depths, were it not that, even in the most extreme of them, it had so to

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142 OGT, 225.
143 OGT, 231.
turn about that all its darkness, vainglory, and godlessness seems to be noting but self-delusion.”144 There is an “about-turn into salvation and redemption [Umschwung in das Heil der Rettung]”145 which allegory signifies. What the “visions of frenzy and destruction” display, above all, is the limit of allegory. This limit is displayed in the dialectical conclusion, by way of a double negation: the allegorization of allegory. Insofar as it is the story of the passion and resurrection of Jesus which conditions the Christian perspective of the allegorists, it serves as the ultimate truth of creation – and therefore of language and signification.

The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of the engravings and descriptions of the period, is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection.146

“In God’s world,” says Benjamin, “the allegorist awakens.” To awaken here is to realize that the melancholic gaze of the allegorist is itself penetrated by the gaze of another. All the fragmentation and ruin of the fallen creation is once again regathered. But, this also means that the truth of allegory is not what is manifest in it. “Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of dead objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope. All this,” Benjamin says, “vanishes with the one about-turn.”147 If there is a pleasure, a “divertissement,” in the allegorical perspective, it is a diversion as fleeting as the world itself. Here allegory appears “not playfully [spielerisch] in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eye of heaven.”148

**The Metapolitics of Decay: “A Hopeless Loyalty to the Creaturely”**
Again, the route to redemption which is exposed in this dialectical double negation does not hastily jump to the positive. Baroque allegory does not, as it were, attempt to force the Messiah to come before his time. It does not try to leap over (Übersprung) the nearest, to paraphrase Rosenzweig.\textsuperscript{149} It does not try to skip ahead to redemption, but pursues downfall (Untergang)\textsuperscript{150} by remaining loyal to the creaturely. What is most characteristic of the things of creation – including the human body – is decay and downfall. To keep faith with such downfall is not to do violence to it – a violence which it already does to itself – but through acknowledging it: by knowing it. Indeed knowledge (Wissen) was the defining feature of the human in fallen creation. The explicit and exacerbated abstraction which characterizes allegory (recall: Benjamin’s definition of allegory was that of the “expression of convention,” which is to say an expression of its very abstraction, a manifest arbitrariness) means that “it is at home in the Fall.”\textsuperscript{151} Benjamin refers once again to his 1916 language essay, and specifically to the claim that the “knowledge of evil has no object. There is no evil in the world.”\textsuperscript{152} In this light, it becomes clear that the evil which the Trauerspiel (playfully) displays is in fact empty. It is nonsense (Geschwätz).\textsuperscript{153} The manifest nonsense of the tyrant’s evil is most obvious in his judgments.

And while, in the earthly court, the uncertain subjectivity of judgment is firmly anchored in reality, with punishments, in the heavenly court the illusion of evil comes entirely into its own. Here the unconcealed subjectivity triumphs over every deceptive objectivity of justice, and is incorporated into divine omnipotence as a 'work of supreme wisdom and...

\textsuperscript{149} See Rosenzweig, Star, 288.
\textsuperscript{150} As the “Theologico-Political Fragment” puts it: “in happiness [Glück] all that is earthly seeks its downfall [Untergang].”
\textsuperscript{151} OGT, 234.
\textsuperscript{152} OGT, 233.
\textsuperscript{153} In context: The Bible introduces evil in the concept of knowledge. The serpent's promise to the first men was to make them 'knowing both good and evil'. But it is said of God after the creation: 'And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold it was very good. Knowledge of evil therefore has no object. There is no evil in the world. It arises in man himself, with the desire for knowledge, or rather for judgment. Knowledge of good, as knowledge, is secondary. It ensues from practice. Knowledge of evil- as knowledge this is primary. It ensues from contemplation. Knowledge of good and evil is, then, the opposite of all factual knowledge. Related as it is to the depths of the subjective, it is basically only knowledge of evil. It is 'nonsense' [Geschwätz] in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard conceived the word. (OGT, 233)
On The Metapolitics of Decay – Chapter 4: Allegorical Happiness

primal love', as hell.\textsuperscript{154} The subversiveness of such nihilism becomes clearest here. The exposure of the possibility of redemption is simultaneously the exposure of the manifest subjectivity and fallenness of all judgment and all law. Justice, such as it is thinkable, is only possible as a “miracle.” “The display of manifest subjectivity,” says Benjamin, “becomes the formal guarantee of the miracle, because it proclaims the divine action itself.”\textsuperscript{155}

As a “formal” guarantee, the play of mourning, the display of subjectivity, does not bring about the miracle – such a realization remains beyond the capacity of the \textit{Trauerspiel}. This was beyond it aesthetically and theologically. Indeed, “with the banal equipment of the theatre – chorus, interlude, and dumbshow – it is not possible to realize the transfigured apotheosis familiar from Calderon.”\textsuperscript{156} The German Baroque remained incapable of \textit{displaying redemption}. But this refusal – in a strange way remaining loyal to the \textit{Bilderverbot} – remains its enduring achievement.

In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German \textit{Trauerspiel} merits interpretation. In the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last.

If these Baroque poets figures as an essential element in Benjamin’s metapolitics of decay, as I believe they do, then it is one of their greatest achievements to manifest, playfully, the fundamental transience of creation. The possibility of redemption, of the restitution of the prelapsarian state, exists, but never as a goal. The bliss of redemption can only ever be glimpsed in the depths of despair – a despair which does not preclude happiness.

Before concluding, a return to the Panofsky essay (which is already a return to Hegel)

\textsuperscript{154} OGT, 234.
\textsuperscript{155} OGT, 234.
\textsuperscript{156} OGT, 235.
with which we began will be helpful for spelling out this Baroque affinity for happiness, especially in its connection to knowledge. The art of the Baroque is characterized, according to Panofsky, by a certain consciousness of distance. What such works manifests – Panofsky is dealing primarily with painting, but the comparison with drama remains fruitful – in distinction from both Renaissance and Medieval art, is “sentimentality” on the one hand, and “frivolity” on the other. Both were consistently understood pejoratively. The former was based on the impression that “the feeling of Baroque figures lacked genuineness and sincerity. ... that they ‘did not mean it,’ so speak.”\(^{157}\) What such sentimentality exhibited, however, far from a deficiency, was that these figures “not only feel, but are also aware of their own feelings. While there hearts are quivering with emotion, their consciousness stands aloof and ‘knows.’”\(^{158}\) Frivolity, on the other hand, was discerned when this same consciousness of “knowing” lead to the belittling of such feelings with the seemingly “skeptical smile” so characteristic of the paintings of the Italian Baroque.\(^{159}\)

Panofsky’s tactic is to highlight the positive aspects concealed behind these negative judgments about Baroque art. He names two. Firstly, behind this seemingly cynical reflexivity one could detect the “critical” attitude of Descartes’ cogito, ergo sum. Secondly, and more pertinent for present purposes, Panofsky refers to “the curse and the bliss of the new psychology developing in the Baroque era: the sense of humor in the true sense of the term.”\(^{160}\) The distinctive features of the humorist are then delineated in opposition to the satirist.

It is the satirist, not the humorist, who considers himself to be cleverer and better than other people. The humorist, thanks to that consciousness that keeps him at a distance

\(^{157}\) Panofsky, 75.
\(^{158}\) Panofsky, 75. Panofsky, like Benjamin, sees such knowledge in biblical terms. “Now consciousness mean, as the Bible has it, the loss of innocence, but on the other hand the possibility of being “like God,” that is to say, superior to one’s own reactions and sensations. Sentimentality is only a negative aspect of this new consciousness.” Ibid.
\(^{159}\) Panofsky, 80.
\(^{160}\) Panofsky, 80. Emphasis added.
from reality as well as from himself, is capable of both: of noticing the objective shortcomings of life and human nature – that is to say, the discrepancies between reality and ethical or aesthetic postulates – and of subjectively overcoming this discrepancy (therefore the sense of humor is really a Baroque quality) in that he understands it as the result of a universal, even metaphysical imperfection willed by the maker of the world. Thus the real humorist, in contrast with the satirist, not only excuses what he ridicules but deeply sympathizes with it; he even glorifies it, in a way, because he conceives it as a manifestation of the same power that shows itself in the things reputed to be grand and sublime, where as they are, *sub specie aeternitatis*, just as far from perfection as the things reputed to be small and ridiculous.¹⁶¹

In the disillusioned and critical knowledge which emerges in the realization of the “metaphysical imperfection” of the world, a new form of happiness emerges. One that is avowedly not bliss, the blessedness of *Seligkeit*, but a pleasure that emerges in being made aware of this gap between perfect and imperfect happiness – between the hymnic and the elegiac.

For Panofsky and Benjamin both, the Baroque offers an interpretation of modernity which stands in stark contrast to the bourgeois optimism that Benjamin resists. The Baroque attention to theology does not drive these poets (or these painters) to abandon the world for an otherworldly fulfillment. Indeed, it is the theological claim to fallenness – corroborated, no doubt by the violence of history – which refuses the illusion of a premature reparation of the world or the possibility of a cultivated wholeness which would ignore the metaphysical tendency toward decline. It is theology which disillusions modernity.

¹⁶¹ Panofsky, 80.
Chapter 5: From the Metapolitics of Decay to the Politics of Transience

I. Introduction

What this project is heading towards is a theory of politics which is founded upon the idea of happiness. This politics, so far only an implicit metapolitics of decay, was given its metaphysical basis in the first chapter where the ontology of decay was shown to unfold as a result of the creation and fall of language: from the singular, immediate, “blissful” spirit of Adam’s language to the multiple mediated languages of man. Its history and its phenomenology were revealed in the drama of ancient Greece (Chapter 2) and modern Germany (Chapter 3), respectively. In Greek tragedy there was found an intimation of the subversive potential, not of bliss, but of happiness. Here the happiness of the fortunate man who confronted fate found release from its web-like extension. A certain decline in the efficacy of fate was presaged already within pagan antiquity. Similarly, at the origins of European modernity, in the plays (Spiele) and the play (Spiel) of some German Protestant playwrights, a certain pleasure was discerned in the melancholic absorption of the men of the Baroque. Their unflinching gaze upon the ruins of history would reveal a tendency which history shared with nature; namely, decay. The more properly political dimension of this metapolitics of decay, however, has yet to be spelled out.

It was in a fragment composed sometime between 1919 and 1921 where Benjamin’s metaphysical insights were first brought to bear on the question of politics. The text marks a transition from the implicit metapolitics of decay of the “Language” essay into a more explicit politics of transience. This interest was sparked, in part, by his initial encounter with the work and the person of Ernst Bloch (1885 - 1977), whom he met in Switzerland upon completing his
doctoral dissertation at the University of Bern.¹ Bloch had immigrated to Switzerland in 1917, along with many other German pacifists who sought to elaborate an intellectual and political opposition to the German war effort. “Bloch joined the ranks of the ‘Anti-Kaiser Germans’ in Switzerland,” which was, as Anson Rabinbach notes, “a virtual ‘who's who’ of the German exile intelligentsia in World War I.”² Bloch’s anarchism and pacifism have a clear influence on Benjamin’s thinking at this time. Furthermore, Bloch’s political program, which consisted of a fundamentally negative aim – to encourage the failure of German military efforts – and whose goal was an “unhappy” outcome, the importance of the theme of decay proves useful. Bloch offered the following statement in his writing of the period.

> Our hope remains... that Germany must first freely undergo the destruction and defeat of its military autocracy in an 'unhappy' outcome of the war, if its deeply buried currents of beclouded, dreamy piety., are to come to consciousness.³

But it is also the theological dimension of Bloch’s work to which Benjamin was drawn. It was Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* (1918) in which the anti-war message is couched in terms of a messianic redemption. As Uwe Steiner notes, “Bloch reformulates the message of socialism with his entreaty for a Kingdom of God, the ‘necessary and a priori church posited after socialism.’ For him, ‘the organization of the Earth’ contains, ‘in the mystery of the Kingdom of God, its immediately effective and immediately deducible metaphysics.’”⁴

If Benjamin’s “Fragment” can be seen as bearing the influence of Bloch’s work, as it clearly does, the influence should not be understood as one of total agreement. Benjamin will

¹ For a fuller account of this context see Uwe Steiner, “The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political” *New German Critique*, No. 83, Special Issue on Walter Benjamin (Spring - Summer,2001), pp. 43-88; and Anson Rabinbach, “Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism” *New German Critique*, No. 34 (Winter, 1985), pp. 78-124.
² Rabinbach continues, “Bloch, along with Hugo Ball, the Dadaist-Anarchist, wrote for numerous exile newspapers especially the Bern Freie Zeitung and Rene Schickele's *Die weissen Blätter*.
⁴ Steiner, “True Politician,” 47.
note a strong affinity for the figure of Bloch, which he found much more agreeable than his writings: “the author is ten times better than his book” 5 Indeed, Benjamin saw his own thought as “diametrically opposed” 6 to that of Bloch’s. But even despite this distaste for Bloch’s work, he will claim that *Spirit of Utopia* “is nevertheless the only book on which, as a truly contemporaneous and contemporary utterance, I can take my own measure.” 7 Thus, although no extant copies of it exist, Benjamin’s letters attest to an intensive reading of Bloch’s book which culminated in a detailed review which he intended to publish. The review would have registered the ambivalence Benjamin felt toward Bloch. It would have been, says Benjamin in a letter, “highly detailed, highly academic, highly and decidedly laudatory, highly and esoterically critical. I wrote it – I hope – in gratitude to the author, who pleaded with me to do so.” 8

If the review must be considered lost, along with several other writings of the period which were to outline an explicit theory of politics, then the “Fragment” is but a remnant of this project. 9 It is the mention of Bloch’s book in the fragment which provides the clearest indication of this context. 10 But perhaps the analogy with which Benjamin concludes his *Trauerspiel* study can be applied in this case: “In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are.” 11 The plan of this ruined text concerns happiness and its relation to the metapolitics of decay.

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5 Benjamin, Corr, 148.
6 Benjamin, Cor, 158.
7 Benjamin, Corr, 148.
8 Benjamin, Cor, 158.
9 It is likely that the 1921 “Critique of Violence” essay is the longest extant remnant of this larger work. See SW1,236-253. However, the focus here on the theme of “happiness” makes the “Fragment” a much more appropriate site of inquiry.
10 The executors of Benjamin’s literary estate, Theodore Adorno and Gershom Scholem, disagree about the dating of this text. Where Scholem claims it is a product of the period of the early 1920s, Adorno argued that it was a much later effort – dating from about 1938 (see SW3, 306 n1). Needless to say, I believe Scholem is correct. Not only does this fragment resonate with the themes of what I am calling the metapolitics of decay, but it is arguably a different political intervention from the late “On the Concept of History” (1940), despite the common invocation of the Messiah. I will come back to this difference below.
11 Benjamin, OGT, 235.
But first we need to add another layer of historical context. While it was a common opposition to the Great War which provided, at least in part, the pretext for Benjamin’s initial enthrallment with Bloch, there was another violent political occurrence more historically proximate to the “Fragment.” The German Revolution of 1918-19, which occasioned a more ambivalent response from Benjamin, had its supporters who too readily saw the “messianic” potential in the revolution’s various factions. Bloch’s pacifism did not, it seems, foreclose the possibility of revolutionary violence in the face of “diabolical” power: “It is necessary to oppose established power with appropriately powerful means, like a categorical imperative with a revolver in your fist.”

In the “Fragment” Benjamin credits Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* with having “repudiated with utmost vehemence the political significance of theocracy.” This attribution is best read as a subtle undermining of Bloch’s support for revolutionary violence. For, in fact no such repudiation is found in the book.

The context, then, for the “Fragment” is one of various historical alliances between the theological and the profane. The wider horizon includes the theocratic aspirations of the Prussian state in its world-historical battle against barbarism – and the theological and metaphysical justifications with which it was provided. But it also includes the theological cast with which the German revolution was provided – be it in bolshevist or social democratic form. Against these alliances Benjamin poses a more complex, dialectical relation between the theological and the political.

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13 As Uwe Steiner notes, “There is considerable evidence that *Spirit of Utopia* tends to emphasize, rather than vehemently deny, the political importance of theocracy.” See “True Politician,” 47. But Steiner does identify such a critique of political theocracy in Bloch’s “anti-Kaiser” comrade in Switzerland, Hugo Ball. It was Ball who stated decisively that the "Kingdom of God on Earth" was sacrilege, that "theocracy, a might installed by God," was "the sacrilege of sacrileges." His pamphlet, *Toward the Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, which Benjamin might already have read in the year of its publication, 1919 is an ardent protest against any form of bond between religion and the state with a view to the defeat of the theocratic system of the Central Powers dominated by Prussia-Germany. It culminates in a call upon the "solidarity of the European mind against the theocratic claim of any and every metaphysics of the state." Steiner, “True Politician,” 46.
II. Benjamin’s Profane Theology

Theology is the *presupposition*, but never the *basis* of historical action. This much will have been clear from the organization of this project, which begins, like Benjamin’s “Language” essay, in the immemorial past of creation. Theology, as it has been noted, has a unique *diagnostic* capacity. Just as essential as it was for a “critical understanding of the *Trauerspiel,*” the true stakes of a worldly politics only come into view from the “higher domain of theology.”¹⁴ From this height theology is able to see into the metaphysical depths of the problem of historical life, and is thereby able to invoke a perspective which maintains a “total absence of illusion about [its] age.”¹⁵ The theological perspective owns up to the fall, and thus acknowledges the tendency toward decline which is inscribed in the created order in its postlapsarian phase – that is, its historical phase. In this perspective “the Fall contemplates itself, and thereby arrests its downward momentum.” By contrast, “Bourgeois society is…a hell that does not recognize itself as such. Not only is Paradise lost, so too is the very awareness of its loss. Fallen man has forgotten that he has forgotten.”¹⁶

Yet, the work that theology can do for politics is not without limits. What Benjamin notes with respect to the Baroque applies *mutatis mutandis* to modernity more generally. “Religious aspirations did not lose their importance: it was just that this century denied them a religious *fulfillment* [*Lösung*], demanding of them, or imposing on them, a secular [*Weltlich*] solution instead.”¹⁷

Such a vision of the profane as the essential context for historical action, which is nonetheless only visible as such – as profane – due to a theological delineation of its limits, was a perspective Benjamin shared with many of his contemporaries. Not only with Adorno – who

¹⁴ OGT, 216.
¹⁵ SW2, 733.
¹⁶ Wohlfarth, On Some Jewish Motifs,” 44.
¹⁷ OGT, 79, emphasis added.
would famously identify an agreement between theology and materialism\(^{18}\) – but with Adorno’s early mentor and a close friend of Benjamin’s, Siegfried Kracauer, the literary editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, where Benjamin would publish often. Kracauer, in a polemical response to Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber’s German translation of the Hebrew Bible, took issue, not so much with the philological aspect of the project, as its participation in a larger movement of “*religious renewal*.”\(^{19}\) What Buber and Rosenzweig sought through the renewal of the Jewish tradition by way of lay education – in the “*Lehrhaus Movement*”\(^{20}\) struck Kracauer as too uncritical of an attempt at re-enchantment. While Kracauer was not above the deployment of theological themes,\(^{21}\) he nonetheless was of the opinion that “today access to truth is by way of the profane.”\(^{22}\) Where theology excels in its diagnostic capacity, it can offer no authentic solution to the problems of the profane.\(^{23}\) The theology Benjamin (and Kracauer) have in mind is not one which belongs to a continuous theological “tradition.” The historical channels through which a tradition might flow have not escaped the ruptures which condition historical experience more generally. A “shattering of tradition”\(^{24}\) has taken place. Thus, theology remains, but it is broken and hobbled; it is the dirty little secret of the profane. Theology, “as we know, is small and ugly


\(^{19}\) Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 200, Kracauer’s emphasis.


\(^{21}\) His late work on film theory, completed while in exile in New York, attests to this even in the title alone: Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton University Press, 1997).


\(^{23}\) In this connection consider Barth’s, almost simultaneous (i.e. in 1919) inversion of this relation. For Barth, it is the profane – in its most secular, as the Spartacist uprising, etc. – by which we can identify the problem of profane life (God’s “No”); it remains decidedly out of human hands to register the solution (God’s “Yes”).

\(^{24}\) SW4, 254.
and has to keep out of sight.”

Why must theology stay out of sight? Is it a strategic decision, such that it can only be deployed when no one is watching – a secret Benjamin betrays time and again in his writings? Or is it that what theology reveals is a non-empirical – that is, metaphysical – truth: such that its greatest contribution to profane politics is the insight it offers into the pre-historical lapse? As one of the primary texts of the metapolitics of decay, theology narrates a past prior to the past any philosophy of history can touch.

When we come to the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” however, this perspective undergoes some modification. Theology continues to condition politics in its diagnostic capacity. However, whereas the emphasis on the problem of the fall – which was the principle problem for the Baroque – does not diminish, a new question emerges; this one, post-historical. Theology will not only pose the problem but it will also offer a solution, indeed, the Solution (Die Lösung) in redemption (Erlösung). Yet, the enclosing of the profane within theological brackets of creation and redemption does not make politics any more susceptible to theocracy. Just the opposite: the inclusion of the concept of redemption, as a theological category, makes its political appropriation that much harder.

For it is “[o]nly the Messiah himself” who “consummates all historical happening [historisches Geschehen], in the sense that he alone redeems [erlöst], completes, creates its relation to the Messianic.” And from this limiting of the task of redemption (Erlösung) to the Messiah, follows the impossibility of the profane being based upon the Kingdom of God. This is why theocracy cannot have a political significance. The possibility of its “religious” significance is a question Benjamin leaves open. Nevertheless, with these limitations upon the shape and structure of worldly politics, what is left? For, although theology

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25 SW4, 389.
26 Thus, Benjamin’s trouble with theocracy “as a political category” does not derive from a desire to banish the theological from the public sphere. Such intrusions are welcomed by Benjamin.
cannot be the basis for politics, it remains its presupposition.

III. Happiness

The basis for politics is found in happiness. In what way, then, can the profane “erect itself,” as Benjamin says, on the idea of happiness? It would be a mistake to assume this political happiness indicates the telos of a good political order in the Greek sense of Eudemonia. But nor is it a strictly anti-political hedonism – although the latter mistake would certainly land one closer to Benjamin’s perspective than the former. In any case, happiness serves as the basis for profane politics because it is manifestly non-messianic, for “certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness [Glücksuchen] runs counter to the Messianic direction.” But it is precisely by virtue of abandoning all messianic pretensions that the profane becomes a force (Kraft) that promotes the coming of redemption. It is the very profanity of the profane (die profane Ordnung des Profanen) which grants it this force, and thereby assists the divine force already, in seems, in motion. In its limitation to the role of assisting or promoting (befördern), it would be possible to call this force “weak,” in anticipation of the later work, “On the Concept of History.” There is a relation, one which “resonates inalienably” (schwingt... unveräußerlich), between happiness and redemption, but it is one that must be conceived of as primarily dialectical and not analogical. That is, historical humanity is not to be understood as a mediator of divine redemption in any positive sense. If it bears the work of redemption, it does so only negatively – perhaps, weakly.

It is noteworthy that Benjamin’s concept of profane politics differs from what we might call “secular” politics. That is, by refusing not only the illusion of theocracy, but also that of a

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27 SW 3, 305.
28 The ontological status of this divine force is not spelled out.
29 SW4, 389. Translation modified.
total disenchantment, Benjamin does not advocate the exclusion of theological categories from politics; even if, out of a strategic necessity, such theology keeps “out of sight.” A politics true to its profanity will do just the opposite: it “enlists the services of theology.” By virtue of this agreement, the profane which is “not itself a category of this Kingdom,” becomes nonetheless “a decisive category of its quietest approach.”

How does this dialectical relation proceed? Benjamin provides an image (Bild) by which this “problem” can be stated. It consists of two arrows pointing in opposite directions: one representing the direction of a “messianic intensity,” the other the happiness sought by a “free humanity.” The goal (Ziel) toward which these two arrows point are opposed, but in their relation lies the secret of a “mystical conception of history.” To say that it is mystical means, on the one hand, that it is not “mythical”; that is, it is not the circular temporality of fate. But just as surely does the mystical differ from the simply linear. What will later be called the “empty, homogenous” time of historicism fails to measure up to messianic time because it is formally indifferent to what might occur within it; and because it harbors a teleological bias toward “progress.” But one of Benjamin’s emphases here is that, in 1940 when the seemingly opposed forces of fascism and communism were mystically aligned, the ideology of progress has empirically proven itself wanting, to say the least.

While messianic intensity is realized in the consummation, redemption, and completion

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30 “in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.” Arcades Project, 471. Similarly, “My thinking is related to theology as blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, noting of what is written would remain.” Arcades Project, 471.

31 SW4, 389.

32 See Irving Wohlfarth, “A mystical transfer of energies takes place. To one coming corresponds another; to the messianic promise, Stendhal’s promesse du Bonheur” Radical Philosophy (153), 2009, 19.

33 See chapter 1 on the “circus” of the amphitheatre.

34 Eric Jacobson makes the point that what the Messiah is said to consummate in the Fragment is not simply “history” in the abstract, but “historical occurrence” (historisches Geschehen). See Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem (Columbia University Press, 2003).
of historical happening, happiness tends or “points” toward downfall (Untergang). According to the supra-historical movement of the messianic, creation is oriented toward redemption. The earthly, however, in its postlapsarian state is no longer blissful – even if nature’s bliss has always already been a bliss of “a lower degree”: the named creation has never been as “godlike and blissful” as the man who named it. The happiness of a free humanity cannot rescue the earthly from what Paul called its “bondage to decay.” But it is capable of guiding it into the decay that is its ownmost profane potential. Just as in its prelapsarian state nature was subject to the “blissful Adamite spirit of language,” it is now, as fallen, dependent upon the happy (i.e. the weak) messianic force of humanity to lead it into the profane redemption of downfall. “For in happiness [Glück] all that is earthly seeks its downfall [Untergang], and only in happiness [Glück] is its downfall [Untergang] certain to find it.”

Benjamin discerns a “correspondence” (he uses the verb entspricht) between the profane and the messianic directions: one that is, as it were, formal. The messianic age will be a restoration of an original condition of creation and thus of immortality. The profane order of nature, to which historical humanity is confined, is not capable of bringing about such a restoration, precisely because of the unidirectionality of transience and decay. And yet, immortality and transience both bespeak a certain eternity [Ewigkeit]. The decay or downfall of nature, eternal in its transience becomes what Benjamin calls the “rhythm of messianic nature.” Such a correspondence becomes visible not despite the tendency toward downfall, but by virtue of the endless cycle of decay. The political lesson here is that although such downfall would be the end of politics, it is nonetheless also its goal – happiness is the means by which this goal can be

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35 SW1, 73.
36 Romans 8:21. For an interesting, but finally unconvincing, argument about the deep connection between the “Fragment” and Romans 8 see Jacob Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 70f.
37 SW 3, 306.
achieved. At the conclusion of the “Fragment” Benjamin makes explicit what was implicit throughout: politics becomes “nihilism.”

Redemption is for the Messiah alone – Messianism is not a human task in any positive sense. The relationship between the messianic and the profane is not one which a revolution – Bolshevist, Democratic, otherwise – might consummate. Insofar as the profane might approach the messianic, it must do so dialectically, which, in this case, means: only by way of its opposite. Happiness is privileged because of its utter lack of messianic pretension. By means of happiness as the profane, yet “quietly” messianic force of political action, the transformation of the metapolitics of decay into a politics of transience is complete.

**IV. Barth’s Theology of the Profane**

Before concluding this project, it may be useful to consider Benjamin’s politics of transience in relation to the comparable project of one of his contemporaries. In order to do so, it will be necessary to stage – not re-staged – encounter. For, although it could have, such an encounter never took place. In order to open up an unexplored, but potentially fecund avenue of dialogue whose full investigation exceeds the limits of the present project, I am going to read Benjamin’s “Theologico-Political Fragment” in comparison with his contemporary, the Protestant theologian, Karl Barth.

It is fairly safe to assume that the Berlin-born Jewish thinker, Walter Benjamin never met the Swiss Protestant theologian, Karl Barth. But it is equally clear that Barth, who is routinely referred to as the most important theologian of the 20th century, was known to Benjamin. Not only would Barth’s reputation have preceded him – especially in the wake of the publication of the second edition of his commentary on the letter to the Romans in 1922 – but Benjamin and
Barth moved within intellectual and social circles which occasionally intersected. Benjamin, for instance from about 1935, maintained a close friendship with one of Barth’s former students, the theologian and radical socialist, Fritz Lieb. Benjamin and Barth both carried on extensive written correspondences with Lieb. It is quite possible, then, that Barth also knew something of Benjamin.

But a slightly more fecund point of contact between the two would have been the *Patmos Circle*, that group of Jewish and Christian authors who all published with the *Patmos Verlag* in Würzburg. Among the more prominent members of the circle were Eugen Rosenstock - Huessy and Franz Rosenzweig. Neither Benjamin nor Barth were “members” of the group, properly speaking. In fact, the most obvious point of overlap between our two thinkers with respect to the Patmos Circle was their *mutual distrust* of, if not *antipathy toward* the group and its members. Benjamin’s reservations centred around the disproportionate number of Jewish converts (or would-be converts) to Christianity who numbered among the group – Benjamin’s letters, for instance, note his almost visceral reaction to Rosenstock, upon meeting him.  

Rosenzweig garnered much greater respect from Benjamin and may even indicate that Benjamin kept up with the work that came out of the Patmos Circle. Which brings us to Barth. Barth’s criticism of the group – namely, that it was too “Gnostic” – only came late in his life. But while Barth did not maintain long term involvement with the Circle, a lecture he delivered in 1919 to a gathering of Religious Socialists in the village of Tambach in Central Germany, captured the interest of Rosenzweig and company. The talk, “The Christian’s Place in Society,” it turns out, became the

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38 “Toward the end of my visit [with Rosenzweig] Mr. [Eugen] Rosenstock arrived, who, on account of the impression he makes, corroborated the reputation that precedes the personalities of the Patmos circle.” This reputation concerned “conversion.” (Cor, 204) A conversion to Christianity which Rosenstock completed, and Rosenzweig seriously contemplated.


Patmos Verlag’s very first publication. It is thus possible that Benjamin read Barth’s essay. However, even if he had, there is no evidence that it made any lasting impression. As late as 1938 Benjamin (who only lived until 1940) would admit a complete ignorance of Barth’s work.\[41\]

Thus, despite the historical possibility of an encounter between Benjamin and Barth, no such encounter took place. But, as I am suggesting, this may be a good thing. For despite the theological innovations that were taking place during the period of the Weimar Republic, including efforts in Jewish-Christian dialogue, Jewish-Christian theological encounters tended not to work out so well. Martin Buber’s attempt to engage Jews and Christians in substantive theological debate within the pages of his journal, Der Jude, is one example.\[42\] These encounters would almost always come up against a theological wall – usually one of Christian construction. Paul Mendes-Flohr has noted “two overarching themes” which characterized even those liberally minded Christians of the period who were willing to engage in such dialogue: First, these Christian thinkers could not rid themselves of

the tenacious tendency of German philosophy and historical scholarship to regard post-biblical Judaism as a religion beholden to a deficient conception of God, heteronymous laws, and spiritually jejune ritual – in a word, what was derisively called Pharisaism; and secondly, the contention, particularly popular in the Weimar period; that Judaism is fundamentally a worldly faith bent on propagating a secular activism, and thus the manifest propensity of Jews for radical politics.\[43\]

While certainly the second criticism of Judaism would not have held much weight for Barth, if not for his own affinity with radical politics during this period, than because for Barth no “worldliness” no matter how “secular” could insulate itself from divine revelation – just as little could any religious institution claim to contain it. But Barth would not have kept himself free of

\[41\] In a letter to the theologian Karl Thieme, a Protestant convert to Catholicism whose book, Am Ziel der Zeiten? [Is this the End Times?] Benjamin had read, Benjamin notes the following: “Reading your book, I regretted not knowing Barth so that I could do justice to how your way of thinking is related to dialectical theology. My intuition tells me that the opposition must be almost total.” Cor, 606.
\[42\] See Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Ambivalent Dialogue” in Divided Passions.
\[43\] Mendes-Flohr, Divided Passions, 142-143.
the prejudice which locked Judaism up in its biblical form – one which refused to recognize Judaism as a “living” tradition.

Thus, we can surmise that, for various reasons, the Benjamin-Barth encounter, had it taken place, would have been unsuccessful. Not only would Benjamin have declined any such invitation to engage in a confessionally oriented theological conversation in the first place (especially if it had come from Buber); but Barth, like so many of his contemporaries, would have drawn his theological line in the sand. Finally, the strong reaction Benjamin had to the likes of Rosenstock would have only been exacerbated in combination with the personal discomfort Barth confessed to feeling when in conversations with Jews. So, with disaster averted, it is possible to stage this encounter in a different way.

I want to do this by way of an analysis of one of Barth’s texts with attention to its resonances with Benjamin’s “Fragment.” These texts are very different in kind – the text from Barth is the published version of a rather long and rhetorically complex lecture, delivered in 1919, and to which I’ve already referred; while Benjamin’s is an esoteric and elliptical “fragment.” But, different as they are, they share a common horizon and, to some degree, a common concern. That concern can be summarized most basically as the rethinking of the relationship between the Holy and the Profane.

In terms of the common horizon, both texts were composed in the wake of 1914. Both thinkers were critics of the German war effort and both looked in horror and despair as their respective mentors embroiled themselves in displays of patriotic enthusiasm.  

44 Benjamin’s final break with the German Youth Movement, of which he was an active member, came when Gustav Wyneken came out in support of the war. Barth, similarly, recalls the “black day” in August 1914 when many of his theological teachers from Marburg signed the infamous “Manifesto” of 93 German intellectuals in support of the war – including his mentor Wilhelm Hermann. In 1957, reflecting on the early days of the war Barth wrote the following:
particularly egregious, in both cases, was not just the political decision to support the Fatherland, but the decision to provide a kind of metaphysical or *theological justification* for the War. This would have been, as is clear from both texts, an illegitimate blurring of the distinction between the Holy and the Profane. Furthermore, and not unlike Benjamin, Barth’s task in the Tambach lecture was also to unsettle easy alliance between theology and politics in the period of the German Revolution. Barth’s particular task was to unburden the religious socialists of the conviction that Social Democracy was marching in lock-step with – if not bringing about – the coming of the Kingdom of God.45

It would not take more than a cursory reading of these two texts to reveal the vast differences between them, but the desire, in both cases, to trouble the easy association of the Holy with the Profane, situates them within comparable orbits. Furthermore, the manner in which this work of troubling is carried out, in each case, is called *dialectical*. However, it is precisely in pursuing what is meant, in each case, by the term “Dialectical,” that the differences will become most apparent.

On September 25, 1919 Barth, an active member in the Swiss Social Democratic Party, was invited to give a lecture to a gathering of Religious Socialists in Germany. At this point Barth was just a minister in a small working-class parish. He was not a well-known figure among German Socialists. But, Swiss Socialism was known for its relative autonomy with respect to International Socialism and, furthermore, had a rich history of Christian involvement in the party.

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Both of these factors made a speaker from Switzerland especially desirable. Not to mention, their first choice for a speaker – a more well-known figure, Leonhard Ragaz – declined their invitation at the last minute. Barth came in his place – and he left an impression.

What the German Religious Socialists were struggling with was: what future does Social Democracy have in the increasingly narrow space between bolshevism, on the one hand and its violent and reactionary opposition, on the other? – for it was only months prior to this gathering that the German Social Democrats did their part to quash the Sparticist Uprising, and summarily execute its leaders – Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Did a specifically Christian Socialism have something important to offer at this moment? How, in short, could Socialism contribute to the coming of the Kingdom of God? If these were the questions Barth was to answer, then, as one commentator notes, “[a] more unsuitable choice for a speaker … could scarcely have been found.”

Barth preferred to disarticulate the coordination of the Kingdom of God with any social or political movement. There is a prior movement “from above,” Barth says, that does to lend itself to any particular program (religious or otherwise), all parochial limits must be exploded. At best what can be done is to “follow” this prior movement. “The kingdom of God,” he says, “does not begin with our movements of protest. It is the revolution which is before all revolutions.”

And yet, despite the disarticulation of the holy and the profane, there remains the possibility, the necessity, of understanding their more dialectical relation. Barth speaks of the relation between the Holy and the profane as, in one respect, a relation of analogy. This “one respect” is the affirmative moment in the larger divine movement which affirms– but also negates Analogy is thus ultimately subordinated to the dialectic. Subordinated, and not sublated,

46 McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realist Dialectic..., 196.
47 Barth, 299.
it should be added, for, as Barth says, the synthesis is the origin [Ursprung], the starting point of
the dialectic, not its destination: “the synthesis…is in God alone.” From the side of the profane,
there is only the restless movement of affirmation and negation. The divine Yes is followed with
the human affirmation of the world as creation – as having a divine origin. This affirmation is
paradigmatically legible in the parables of the Synoptic Gospels.

Of the Parables Barth says: what it is that “sets them off in bold relief from Aesop's and
Gellert's fables, Grimm's and Anderson's fairy tales, Christoph Schmid's stories, and the religious
mythology of India” is neither aesthetic nor religious in nature. Instead, it is the disenchanted
objectivity and profanity of parables which renders them most significant. Parables, he says,
disclose “nothing heavenly whatsoever….but simply the world as one finds it.” Parables boldly
draw analogies between the “Kingdom of Heaven” and the world, often signified by the Synoptic
refrain: “The Kingdom of God is like...” And yet, what is so striking about these analogies is
the way in which they unfold: namely, “without concern for the sometimes rather massive
fragments of earth that cling to the events and relations described.” Thus, what we find in these
unpretentious vignettes “is all so commonplace, so lacking in illusion, and so wholly without
eschatological reference.” The same insight that informed Benjamin’s analysis seems to be at
work here as well. It is through a theological perspective that a clearer access to the profane is
opened up – one which is not beclouded by the liberal and bourgeois illusions of a telos, of an

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48 Barth, Word, 322.
49 Barth, Word, 304. Barth provides a wonderful compendium of the parables in the Synoptic Gospels:
A perfect rogue is graciously received by his father, simply because his father is his father - a reason
beyond the comprehension of the onlookers. A scolding woman proves mightier than a judge who has
feared neither God nor man. A king plunges into an illconsidered war and presently has retreat sounded in
the nick of time. A speculator invests his whole fortune in a costly pearl. A shrewd old codger, a veritable
war-profiteer, knows how to get hold of happily discovered treasure. A rascal handles unrighteous mammon
as if there were no mine and thine. A group of children quarrel in the street. A farmer sleeps and rises in
comfort while his land works for him. A man is mauled and half killed by robbers and, although the world
is full of pious people, he must wait a long time before he finds a sympathetic soul- from Samaria. A
whimsical host wishes by hook or crook to see his house full. A lone woman having lost a penny acts as if
she had lost everything. A righteous and an unrighteous man stand near each other in church, each strictly
in his own character.
independent human progress, of a continuity which connects the “here” of historical life to the “there” of a just and humane state. There is no way from here to there: on this both of our thinkers agree. And both agree, in some sense, and as Barth claims, that “[t]here must still be a way from there to here.”

50 We will come back to this. In any case, the direction, if we can put it in terms reminiscent of Benjamin’s, toward which the parables are oriented—the profane itself—though lacking all eschatological reference, are nonetheless, or for this very reason, Barth says, “brimful of eschatology!”

Barth chooses a rather unsavory “parable” in order illustrate his point. The story of the Roman centurion who approaches Jesus for help in Matthew 8 is not a parable in the literary sense. But again, for Barth the parabolic is not first of all a literary form; it is a perspective upon profane life—one with a “penchant for objectivity.”

52 Despite being a representative of imperial military chauvinism—a figure, Barth no doubt wanted to convey, whose Roman guise could easily be read in Prussian terms—this man had the gall to compare his situation with that of the Jesus. In an attempt to procure Jesus’ healing services, and under his own terms, the soldier made the following analogy. “For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it.”

53 Jesus is “amazed” not by the injustice of the scenario the solider has laid out, but by his “faith.” “The centurion of Capernaum,” Barth says,

whether we like it or not, becomes in his capacity as military officer a parable for the order of the messianic kingdom, and [his] simple insight is presently extolled by Jesus as

50 Barth, Word, 287. There is a difference between Benjamin and Barth on this relationship of the “there” to the “here.” This difference consists, first of all in the substance of the “there.” Not only are there different theological traditions which inform the two perspectives, but the very spatiality of Barth’s language betrays this. For Barth this movement is the theme of his whole project—it is the paradoxical task of theology: to bear witness to the Revelation of Jesus Christ despite the inability to do so. For Benjamin the “there” (or perhaps the “not yet” of the Messianic era) serves as little more than the limiting conditions of the “here” (or the “now”) of the profane.

51 Barth, Word, 304.

52 Barth, Word, 307.

53 Matthew 8:9.
faith such as he had not found in Israel – in that too spiritual Israel which was forever engaged in protest against existing things.\textsuperscript{54}

The audacity of such analogizing is read as “faith,” Barth seems to be saying, because it looks to the profane without the inclination to its critique or transformation. It gazes with an objectivity which, lacking all illusion, sees it for what it is. Such realism, it seems, outweighs any other significance it may carry – as a parable.

Barth, once again using a procedure not unlike Benjamin’s, sees what the latter understood to be a “correspondence” between the profane and the messianic. Just as for Benjamin the profane corresponded to the messianic by virtue of a rhythm – downfall – that was immanent to the world, the analogy the parable draws between the world and God is one based in the world. Admittedly, Barth’s choice of a connection has a much more “Protestant” resonance. “Working well”: this is the profane fact with a heavenly analogy. For there is one thing, Barth says, that “does not occur in the parables: dilettantism, halfwayness, jerry-building.”\textsuperscript{55}

When one does his work well, there comes into evidence not the kingdom of heaven itself but the possibility of it; it is then, as it were, penetrating its world-foreground and entering into consciousness, into fact.\textsuperscript{56}

Working well is the correspondence: even if one works well in a vocation which bears no positive relation to the Kingdom of God; even if such a vocation is, by all appearances, opposed to the justice one would attribute to the coming of this Kingdom. Hidden within the folds of the

\textsuperscript{54} Barth, Word, 307. Despite the fact that Barth seem to limiting if not belittling the role of critique in terms this unfolding of a political theology, we must remind ourselves that the present claims are only one moment in the larger (dialectical) argument which Barth is making. Namely, we are in the initial, preliminary, but necessary moment of affirmation. It is only out of this prior Yes to the world that the No derives its power. Thus, we “say Yes, but only in order out of the Yes still more loudly and urgently to say No.” 313. Incidentally, this also militates against the possibility that Barth is here invoking the common Weimar stereotype of Jews as primarily left wing critics of society. See above.

\textsuperscript{55} Barth, Word, 307.

\textsuperscript{56} Barth, Word, 307.
profane, and agitated by the hard work of those who inhabit it, is a “promise.”\textsuperscript{57} The profane is, for Barth, something like a training ground, a mere preparation for the true divine kingdom. Historical action is penultimate, at best a form of play. In this play, however, lies something significant.

However true it may be that everything we do within the limits of mere particular things and events is only\textit{play} in relation to what really should be done, it is none the less\textit{significant} play if it is rightly engaged in. Poor players will certainly not make good workers; camp-followers, correspondents, and spectators on the battlefield of the everyday can hardly be made into shock troops to storm the kingdom of heaven.\textsuperscript{58}

It is a disillusioned look upon the world in its transitoriness which links the profane to the eschatology it does not presume to represent. Indeed, for Barth there is, in this profane perspective, and in language that echoes Benjamin’s, the possibility of a “farseeing\textit{happy} patience.” And yet, happiness in this case is not the name for the direction of the profane force, it is the joyful assurance that such decay is but a moment in the divine dialectic. Here “all things transitory, even in their abnormal forms, are seen in the light of the eternal.”\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, the double negation that Benjamin discerned in the\textit{allegorical} perspective of the Baroque – when allegory itself becomes allegorized under a divine gaze – is at work in Barth’s theory of the\textit{parabolic}. The parabolic, with its attention to the profane in its profanity, in its injustice and in its transience, also reveals that the transitory itself “is\textit{only} a parable.”\textsuperscript{60}

Not preempting, but\textit{following} the prior movement of God, this is the task of a profane politics which seeks nonetheless to remain attentive to the teachings of the Christian tradition. But following\textit{this} movement is difficult: it shifts\textit{restlessly} between the affirmation of the goodness of the created world and the negation of a world not-yet redeemed. Barth summarizes

\textsuperscript{57} Barth, Word, 308.  
\textsuperscript{58} Barth, Word, 308.  
\textsuperscript{59} Barth, Word, 305.  
\textsuperscript{60} Barth, Word, 306.
this dialectic of Yes and No as follows.

Simple cooperation within the framework of existing society is followed by radical and absolute opposition to that society. But we must... fortify ourselves against expecting that our criticizing, protesting, reforming, organizing, democratizing, socializing, and revolutionizing—however fundamental and thoroughgoing these may be—will satisfy the ideal of the kingdom of God. For, that is really beyond us.61

The political task, as he understands it, is a matter of following the divine movement between affirmation and negation. And this brings with it a certain freedom of movement for the political actor, even a playfulness. Barth speaks of this as,

the freedom of going, with quiet strength, in and out of the house of publicans and sinners; in and out of the house of the mammon of unrighteousness; in and out of the house of the state, which, call it what you will, is the beast of the bottomless pit; in and out of the house of secular social democracy; [...] and finally even in and out of the house of worship. (309)

This free movement is thus, for Barth, also a kind of agitation that would shake off any restraint binding it to a particular ideological or religious form.

The profane sphere of politics is provisional; it is, at best, penultimate. But it is not thereby rendered meaningless. It maintains a relation to that which exceeds it. Historical action can never become identical with redemption, but it can point to redemption: it can become a “parable”—Barth says—of its possibility. Barth will even see parabolic intimations of the divine No in the iconoclasm of the Expressionists and in the radicalism of the Spartacus League.

But, at the end of the day, Barth encouraged the theologically-minded Socialists to support the Weimar coalition and the larger interests of democracy. This was, for Barth, a matter of practical and theological import. What was called for was a

Generous, far-sighted, steadfast conduct toward a social democracy—no, not toward it, as irresponsible spectators and critics, but within it, as those who share hope and guilt with their comrades—in which today we are confronted with the problem of opposition to that which exists, we discover the likeness of

61 Barth, 320.
In a moment of political crisis, Benjamin and Barth both turn to theology in order to determine the prospects for historical action. Both offer a rethinking of the relationship between the Holy and the Profane – and both do so dialectically. That is, both posit, the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of such a relation. But it is also here that the differences between these two efforts become clear: not only in terms of their politics (Barth’s pragmatic Republicanism of Reason as opposed to Benjamin’s political nihilism) or in terms of their theology (with Barth’s insistence upon the specificity of the Christian Revelation, as opposed to Benjamin’s hobbled theology), but also in terms of the dialectic. Benjamin’s resolutely negative dialectic in the face of a Messiah who cannot be summoned is certainly not the same thing as Barth’s hope for a parabolic likeness to the Kingdom which might appear between negation and affirmation.
Conclusion

The dialectic of happiness is the play of hymn and elegy. It is not a determinate historical structure. It is not an engine that moves history in a particular direction, toward a particular *telos*. As play it becomes legible only from the backward glance of the historian; in this case, through the lens of Benjamin’s historiographic work. Happiness is an affect; the dialectic of happiness is one which moves between the extreme dimensions of this affect – bliss and melancholy. As such – as affect and intensity – the dialectic of happiness does not lend itself to modulation. It is not the utilitarian calculus of a maximized felicity, nor the liberal management of pleasure.

Happiness, in Benjamin’s terms, refuses to take on the homunculus features of bourgeois culture. The happiness which conditions Benjamin’s metapolitics of decay and his politics of transience is one which has known the paradisal heights of bliss and has immersed itself in the profane depths of despair.

In Benjamin’s counter-intuitive story of happiness, the Greeks do not compose elegies and Lutherans do not sing hymns. The “naïve” poetry of the Greeks pursues a happiness which is worthy of a song raised before the gods and drives tragic heroes to an overdetermined death. The singular will to happiness which moves the tragic hero does not know the melancholy of modernity, but nor does it know its bourgeois “sentimentality” and decadence. The Baroque poets, on the other hand, have disabused themselves of such naivety – in its pagan and even its Christian forms. The retention of the theological perspective, however, is precisely what makes the “secularization” which Benjamin discerns in early modern Europe a distinctive one. The disillusioned gaze upon profane life, with all of its failures, violence and transience nonetheless
On The Metapolitics of Decay – Conclusion

retains a memory of divine presence, of bliss. In lieu of accepting the consolations the present might offer, the Trauerspiel poets wager on the deus ex machina.

Out of these pagan and Christian extreme manifestations of happiness Benjamin discerns a dialectic. In the current project – and this reflects Benjamin’s own work – the pagan and the Christian are bookended by the Jewish. Creation and redemption determine the dialectic of happiness which will in turn determine the metapolitics of decay – and finally, the politics of transience. Benjamin will attempt to salvage from each, a certain truth. Admittedly, the Baroque is much closer to Benjamin’s own perspective than is the Attic. Benjamin will retain from the Trauerspiel the perspective of the profane, the penchant for elegy and the general melancholy. He sees in the Baroque emphasis on the fall, a lament that more properly echoes the lament of nature – certainly with a fidelity that bourgeois happiness lacks –, even if he will not preserve the doctrinal baggage of original sin. As for the Greeks, it is the tragic hero’s silent protest against fate which Benjamin finds important. There is a naïve but authentic experience of happiness, even bliss, that is lost on the bourgeois liberal politics. To settle for the consolations of the present – for a mitigated and managed happiness – is to lose sight of the extremes which present themselves in the dialectic of happiness. “The idea,” says Benjamin – and we could add the idea of happiness— is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stand alongside its counterpart.”

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1 OGT, 35.
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On The Metapolitics of Decay – Bibliography


Appendix: “The Happiness of Antique Man”

The Happiness of Antique Man (1916)

Walter Benjamin
Translation by William Ohm and Jason McKinney

The man of post-antiquity knows perhaps only a single spiritual condition [seelische Verfassung], in which he relates his inner self [Inneres] with full purity and full magnitude simultaneously to the whole of nature, the cosmos: namely, pain. The sentimental man, as Schiller named him, can win an approximately pure and great – that is, an approximately naïve – feeling of himself only by means of that high price: in which he combines his entire inner being into a unity separated from nature. Even his highest human simplicity and simple-mindedness [Einfachheit und Einfalt] rests on this division from nature by means of pain; and in this opposition a sentimental phenomena and a reflection step into view simultaneously. The thought suggests itself, that reflection paralyzes modern man with such intensity, that in such a simple and simple-minded happiness, which does not know the contrast to nature, the inner man appears to him all too unsubstantial and uninteresting, to be in the deepest free to express himself outwardly, to not remain in fact in a state of shame; concealed and constricted [Verborgnen, Engen]. For the modern man as well, happiness means, naturally, a state of the naïve soul par excellence, but nothing is more indicative of modern man than his attempt to reinterpret this purest revelation of the naïve as the sentimental. The concepts of innocence [Unschuld] and childlikeness, with their tangled mass of wrong and corrupted conceptions, dispute this process of reinterpretation. While naïve innocence [Unschuld], its greatness/magnitude, lives in immediate contact with all the powers and the figures of the cosmos, and it finds its symbols in the purity, strength and beauty of the figure, to the modern man it means the innocence of the homunculus, a microscopic diminutive-innocence, in the form of a soul who knows nothing of nature, it is coy through and through, and doesn’t dare to recognize its state before itself, likewise – to repeat– as if a happy man was an all-too-empty and used up shell, to not sink into coyness in the face of his own gaze. For this reason the modern sensation of happiness possesses the petty and the secretive [das Kleinlich und Heimlich] simultaneously, and it has given birth to the conception of the happy soul, who disavows its happiness before itself in constant activity and
artificial constriction of feeling. The conception of child-like happiness has the same meaning, because it sees in the child not the feeling, pure entity, whom more immediately than another feeling that is expressed, but she sees an egocentric child, one that reinterprets and reduces nature out of ignorance and playfulness to unacknowledged feelings. In Buechner’s “Lenz,” the small Fortune of the Sentimental Soul is described in a fantasy of the sick man, who yearns for peace, in such a way: “‘You see,’ he began again, ‘I can picture her walking through the room, singing softly to herself, every step was music, there was so much happiness [Glückseligkeit] in her, and this flowed over into me, I was always at peace whenever I looked at her, or she leant her head against me… So wholly a child; it was as though she found the world too big, she retreated so completely into her own being, she would seek out the smallest nook in the house, and just sit there, as though her whole happiness [Seligkeit] were concentrated in a single tiny point, and then I too would feel the same; at such moments I could have played like a child.’”

It is definitive for the image, which ancient man had of happiness, that every little modesty, that buries happiness in the individual, and wants to conceal it inaccessibly deep inside by means of reflection (as a Talisman against unhappiness [Unglück]), becomes its most frightening opposite, the sacrilege of the most insane pride: hubris. Hubris is, to the Greek man, the attempt to represent himself – the individual, the inner man – as the bearer of happiness, hubris is the belief that happiness is a property, and even a modesty; hubris is the belief that happiness is something other than a gift [Geschenk] from the gods – which they could take away at any hour, and at any hour unprecedented unhappiness [Unglück] could be destined [verhängen] upon the victor (as in the return of Agamemnon). Thus, it is now said, that the figure in which the happiness of ancient man is afflicted [the form of happiness which affects ancient man] is victory. His happiness is nothing if not this – that the gods destined [verhängen] him to it, and it is his fate [Verhängnis], when he wants to believe that the gods gave it to him and precisely to him. Of this highest hour, which makes men into a heroes, when reflection is kept away from him; in this hour in which all blessing is poured out upon him, in which the victor is reconciled with his city, with the groves of the gods, with the eusebia [right conduct] of the ancestors and finally with the power of the gods themselves, Pindar sang victory hymns. And so the antique man is allocated both in happiness: victory and celebration, merit and innocence

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Unschuld]. Both are of the same necessity and strictness. Because no one can insist on more merit there, where he is a fighter in the athletic contests, even the most outstanding can be sent the more glorious by the gods, who casts him into the dust. And he – the victor – will thank the gods that much more, who have lent him victory over the most heroic. Where does the rigid claim to merit remain, the adventurous expectation of happiness, which places a limit on the citizens life? The agon – and this is the underlying meaning of its institution – limits the amount of happiness for everyone, that the gods destine [verhängen] him to. Furthermore, where does the empty idle innocence [Unschuld] of unknowing remain, with which the modern man conceals his happiness from himself? There the victor stands: visible to all, praised by the people; innocence plagues him with bitter necessity [not], who holds the vessel of victory like a basin full of wine with raised hands, from which a spilled drop falling upon him stained him eternally. Merit he has not to deny and not to obtain clandestinely, that the gods gave to him, and not reflection on his innocence afflicts her (the merit), like the small, restless souls, but fulfillment of the blessings, so that the godly circle, that once selects him, retains the stranger as a hero.

The fortune of the antique man is decided in the celebration of victory: in the fame of his city, in the pride of his district/ area and his family, in the joy of the gods and in sleep, which carries him off to the gods.